David Brin Scott Hampton

THE LIFE EATERS™

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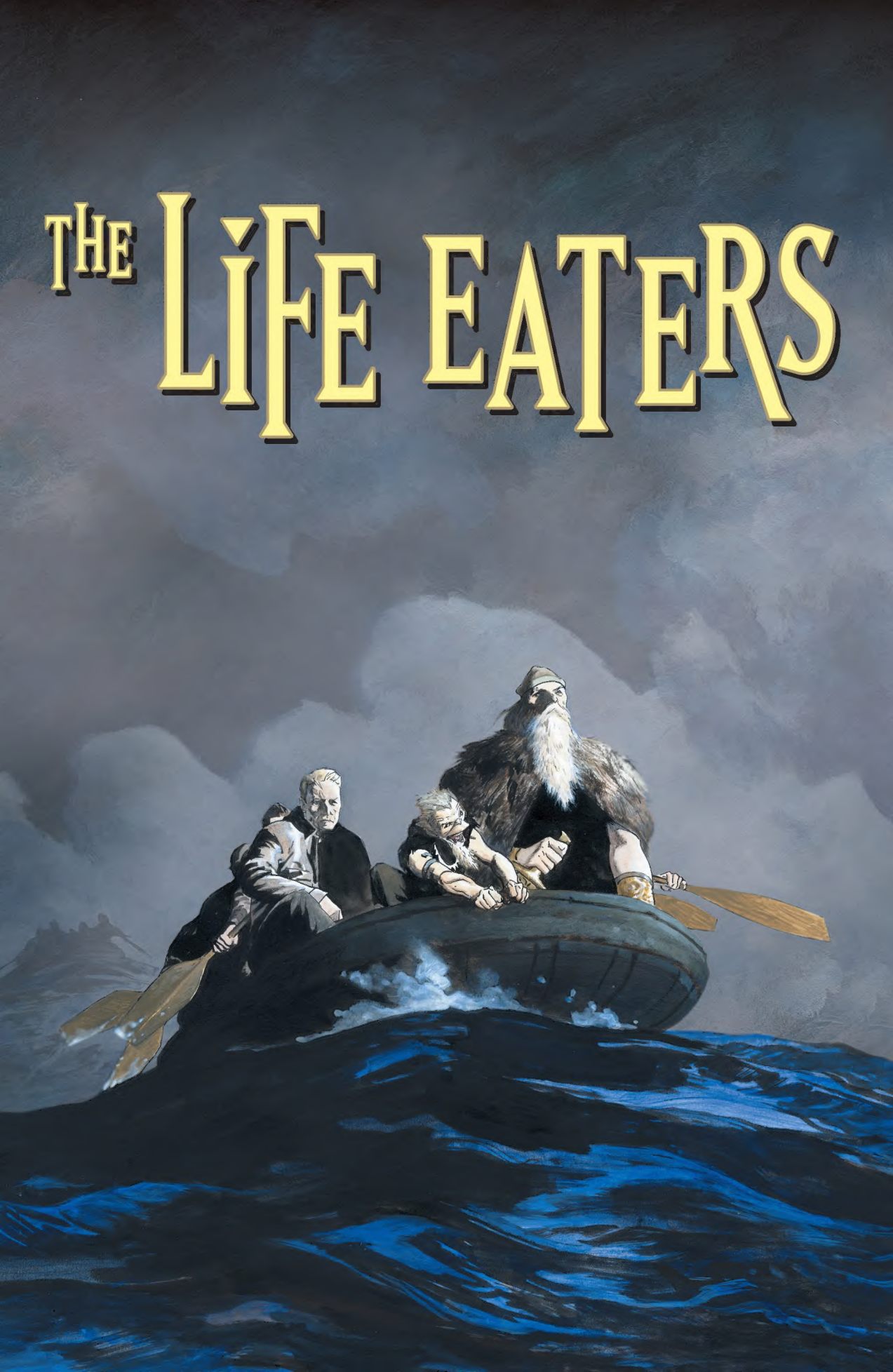

THE LIFE EATERS

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ISBN: 9781623027216 DIGITAL

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Originally published by WildStorm in 2003.

Our thanks to those who helped this challenging project— among them Trevor Sands, Alberto Monteiro, Stefan Jones, Vince Gerardis, Joe Carroll, Joe Miller, Ruben Krasnopolsky, Dustin Laurence and David Clark. Nothing could have happened with John Nee, Scott Dunbier and Paul Levitz of DC and WildStorm. Or Gregory Benford, who dared me to write the original novelette "Thor Meets Captain America," or the votes who kindly nominated it for a Hugo Award. Of course it was an honor working on a "mini-movie" with the brilliant Scott Hampton and legendary Todd Klein. Special appreciation goes to animation maestro Steve Gold, who first stirred an ambition to extend that story to epic length, and Jeff Mariotte who helped make it reality. — David Brin

For help and inspiration—first and foremost Karen Hankala, puppeteer and pal! Also to her boy toy, Durwin Talon. In the inspiration zone, a large gratis to my brothers-in-arms—Dave, Chris, and Ray, for keeping that bar raised high. George, John, Mark—I know you're probably getting tired of being dragged through my acknowledgments, but you're just going to have to deal. (Beverly rocks!) To Letitia, of course! Duh! To Meredith and Sherri for untold kindness. And one more mammoth thank you to my family, Dave Elliott, Mark Kneece, Bob Pendarvis, the baristas at Caffe Driade, Stephen King, Stanley Kubrick, Nick Drake, Tom Petty, Yousaf Islam, Will Patton, and 5,000 others. — Scott Hampton

PROLOGUE
Don't be fooled by the legends. They exaggerate. He was no god. Not even a little bit. Those who say this rob the tale of meaning.
I was there, you see--the night it all began--serving as a cup-bearer for the "king of the gods." So I know about them.
And I know what can be accomplished by a mere man.
It's why I fought... and still fight to this day.
I remember this cup--and everything else--as clearly as this morning...

-PART ONE-

"THE NIGHT OF QUESTIONS"

He came here to Gotland on that long-ago night, accompanied by other heroes, in a flock of mighty birds—B83 bombers from bases in Canada—all of them bound over the pole knowing that it was a one-way mission.

Most of the planes fell before reaching the Baltic…struck down by Nazi rockets or Thor's hammer. No one could tell which…

…even when a surviving bomber finally opened its belly over the dark sea, dropping its burden—a submarine—to splash and sink under the waves, no one aboard felt safe.

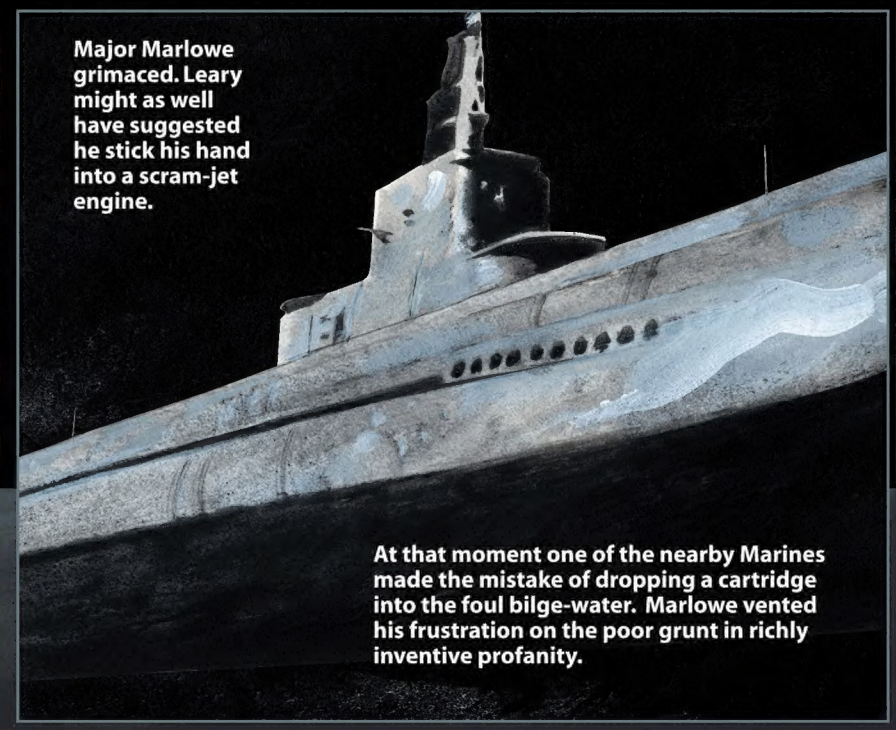
Loki's *dwarf* is a thing of dark forest depths and hidden caves. It wasn't meant for *this* place.
Only *men* would choose such a way to die, in a leaking steel coffin, on a hopeless attempt to blow up *Valhalla*.
But then, it's not like the dwarf had a *choice*.

Why, Chris wondered suddenly—not for the first time. Why do such creatures exist? Wasn't evil doing well enough in the world before they came to help it along?
The sub's engines rumbled and Chris Turing thought. Even imagining a world without Aesir and their servants in it was by now as hard as remembering a time without war.
Listening to the icy Baltic through the tissue-thin bulkhead, Chris watched the gnome huddle atop a crate of hydrogen bomb parts. It gave another moan as the *Razorfin's* periscope went up. More water gurgled through pressure lines.
What's eating the damn dwarf *now?*
Search me.
I thought you were some sort of ***expert*** on the Aesir. You don't know why the thing is ***foaming*** at the ***mouth*** like that?

Why don't you ask him *yourself?*
Sidle up and ask that stench to explain its *feelings?* Hmmph. I'd rather spit in an Aesir's *eye.*

Dig it, daddy-o! There's an Aes over by the *scope,* dope. Be my *guest.*

Go on. Write him runes in his spittoon.


Major Marlowe grimaced. Leary might as well have suggested he stick his hand into a scram-jet engine.
At that moment one of the nearby Marines made the mistake of dropping a cartridge into the foul bilge-water. Marlowe vented his frustration on the poor grunt in richly inventive profanity.

MMFFF!
Wherever they're from, they aren't used to submarines.
I wonder how Loki persuaded these so-called dwarfs to come along...especially on a suicide mission...

A desperate venture. In late 1962 there was very little time left for the last alliance against Nazism. If anything could be done that autumn, to stave off the inevitable, it seemed worth a gamble.

Even Loki—bearlike, nearly invulnerable, always booming laughter that sent chills down human spines—even Loki trembled when *Razorfin* dropped from the belly of a screaming bomber, lurching their stomachs as it plummeted to Neptune's icy embrace.

Chris never breathed during that brief, seemingly endless fall. The crash that followed…the shriek of tortured metal…came almost as relief.

Anything was better than the long, screeching trip over the Pole, skirting Nazi missiles, skimming mountains and gray waters, helplessly listening, strapped in place, as the airmen swooped their flying coffins hither and yon—praying that the enemy's Aesir masters weren't patrolling that section of the North that night…

Of twenty sub carriers sent from Baffin Island, only six made it to the waters between Sweden and Finland. Both *Cetus* and *Tigerfish* broke upon splashdown, tearing like sardine cans, spilling hapless crews into freezing death.

Just four subs left, Chris thought.

Still, our chances may be slim, but those poor *pilots* are the *real* heroes.
I doubt even one of the crews will make it across dark, deadly Europe to Tehran and safety.
Captain Turing!
I'll be right with you, Commander Lewis.
Tell 'em we're savin' our own hooch for ourselves. Good pot is too *rare* to *share*.
Shut *up*, you beatnik *fool*.

I've known Loki for years. I fought alongside him against his Aesir brothers--still he scares the hell out of me, each time I look at him.
Sir, I take it we're approaching point Y?
Twenty minutes, barring the unforeseen.

In the dim light, Chris thought Lewis seemed to have aged over the last twenty hours. The young sub commander knew his squadron wasn't the only thing considered expendable in this operation. Several thousand miles to the west, what remained of the North American Surface Navy was engaged hopelessly for one reason only—to distract the Kriegsmarine and the SS, and especially a certain "god of the sea"—away from the Baltic and Operation Ragnarok. Loki's cousin Tyr wasn't very potent against submarines, but unless his attention was drawn elsewhere, he could make life Hell for them when their tiny force tried to land.

So tonight, instead, he would be making Hell for American and Canadian and Mexican sailors, far away.

Chris shied from thinking about how many boys would die off Labrador, just to keep one alien creature occupied, while four surviving subs tried to sneak in through the back door…

You--?
CORRECT. I WILL NOT ACCOMPANY THE *UNDERSEA* VESSELS, AS THEY ATTEMPT TO BREAK OUT THROUGH THE SKAGERRAK.
I WILL GO ASHORE WITH *THEE*, INSTEAD, TO *GOTLAND*.

Chris kept his face blank. There was no way he or Lewis or anybody else could stop this creature from doing whatever it wanted. One way or another, the Allies were about to lose their only Aesir friend in the long war against the Nazi plague.
If the word "friend" ever really described Loki—who had appeared one day on the tarmac of a Scottish airfield during the final evacuation of Britain, accompanied by eight small, bearded beings carrying boxes. He had led them up to the nearest amazed officer and imperiously commandeered the Prime Minister's personal plane to take him the rest of the way to America.
Perhaps an armored battalion might have stopped him. Battle reports told that Aesir *could* be killed, if you were very lucky, pounding one hard and fast enough. But the local commander decided to take a chance.
Loki had proved his worth many times since that day eighteen years ago.
Until now, that is.
If you insist.
I DO. IT IS MY WILL.
Then I'll explain to Major Marlowe. Excuse me, please.

Voices were hushed. All the young men spoke English, but only half were North Americans. Their shoulder patches—Free French, Free Russian, Free Irish, German Christian—were muted in the dim light, but the mixed accents were unmistakable, like the way they stroked their weapons, or the gleam Chris spotted in several pairs of eyes.

These were the sort who volunteered for suicide missions, a type—common in the world after twenty-three years of horrible war—that had nothing left to lose.

Major Marlowe had come back to help with the landing boats. He did not take the news well.

Loki wants to come along? To *Gotland?*
The bastard's a *spy.* I knew it!
He's helped us in a *hundred* ways, John. Why, just by accompanying Ike to Tokyo, and convincing the Japanese--
Big deal! We'd already *beaten* the Japs! Like we'd have crushed Hitler, if these *monsters* hadn't arrived, like Satan's curse, out of *nowhere!*
And now he's lived among us for *years,* observing our methods, our tactics, our *technology,* the only real advantage we had left!

Chris grimaced. How could he explain to Marlowe? The Marine officer had never been to Tehran, as Chris had, only last year. Marlowe had never seen the capital city of Israel-Iran, America's greatest and most stalwart ally, bulwark of the East.

There, in dozens of armed settlements along the east bank of the Euphrates, Chris had met fierce men and women who bore on their arms tattooed numbers from Treblinka, Dachau, Auschwitz. He heard their story of how, one hopeless night under barbed wire and the stench of chimneys, the starving, doomed masses looked up to see a strange vapor fall from the sky. Unbelieving, death-starkened eyes stared in wonderment as the mists gathered and coalesced into something that seemed almost solid.

Out of that eerie fog, a *bridge* of many colors formed—a rainbow arch climbing apparently without end, out of the places of horror into a moonless night. And from the heights, each doomed man and woman saw a dark-eyed figure on a flying horse ride down. They felt him whisper to them *inside* their minds.

COME, CHILDREN, WHILE YOUR TORMENTERS BLINK UNBELIEVINGLY IN MY WEB OF THE MIND. COME ALL, OVER MY BRIDGE TO SAFETY, BEFORE MY COUSINS DESCRY MY TREASON.

When they sank to their knees, or rocked in thankful prayer, the figure only snorted derision. His voice hissed within their heads.

DO NOT MISTAKE ME FOR YOUR GOD, WHO LEFT YOU HERE TO DIE! I CANNOT EXPLAIN THAT ONE'S ABSENCE TO YOU, OR HIS PLAN IN ALL THIS. THE ALL-FATHER IS A MYSTERY EVEN TO GREAT ODIN!

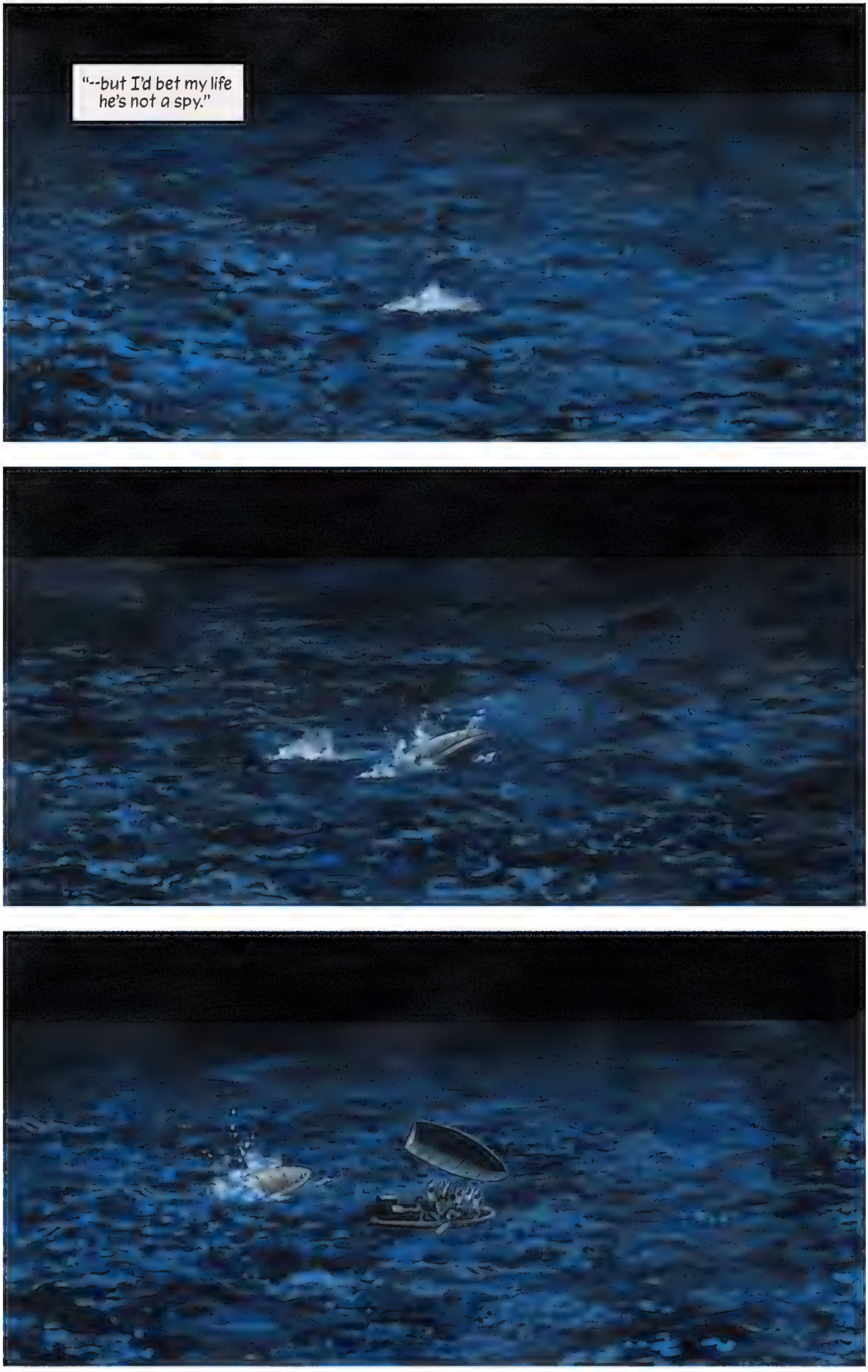
KNOW ONLY THAT I WILL TAKE YOU TO SAFETY NOW, SUCH AS THERE MAY BE IN THIS WORLD. BUT ONLY IF YOU HURRY! COME, AND BE GRATEFUL LATER, IF YOU MUST!

Down to the camps, to bleak ghettoes, to a city under siege—the bridges formed in a single night, and with dawn were gone like vapor or a dream. Two million people, the old, the lame, women, children, the slaves of Hitler's war factories, climbed those paths—for there was no other choice—and found themselves transported to a desert land, by the banks of an ancient river.

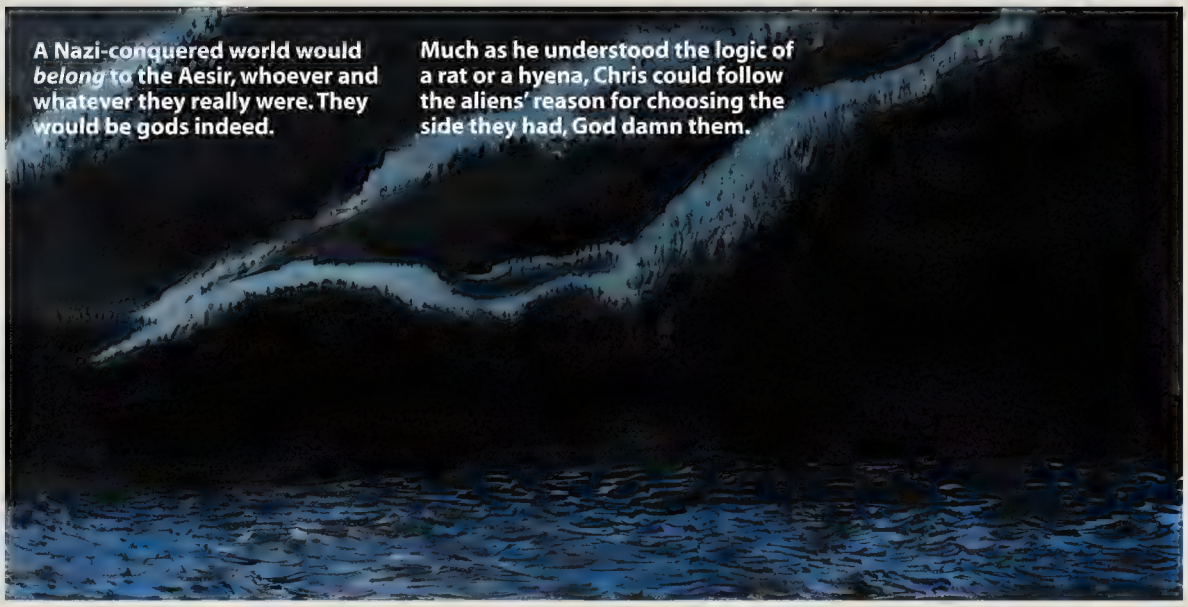
They arrived just in time to take up hasty arms and save a British Army fleeing the wreckage of Egypt and Palestine. They fused with the astonished Persians, with refugees from crippled Russia, building a new nation out of chaos.

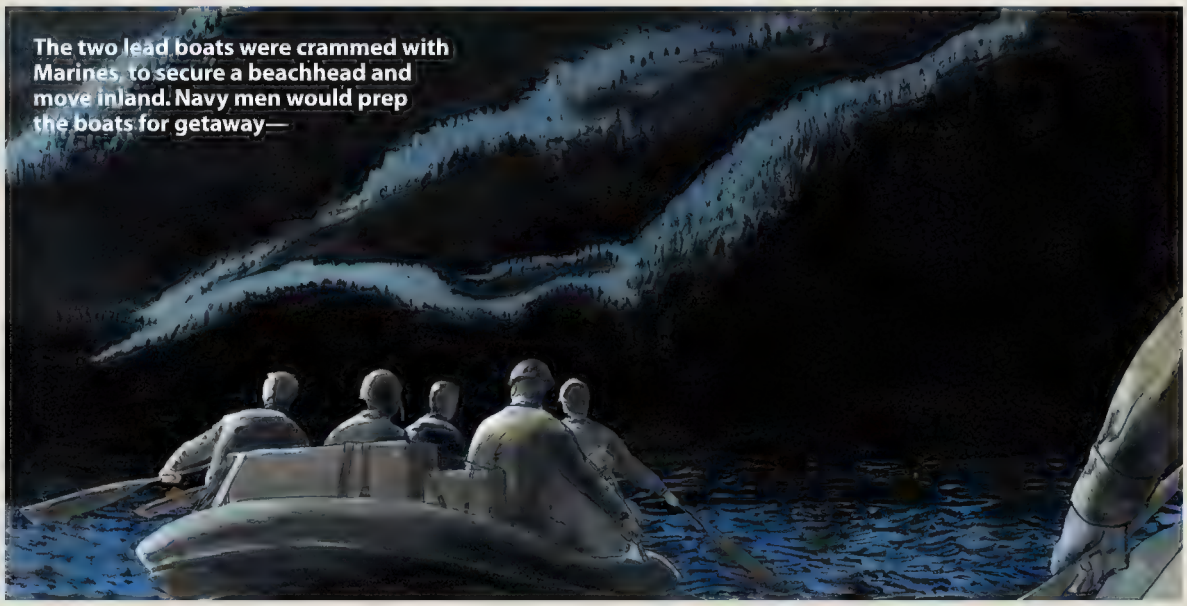
That was why Loki appeared on the tarmac in Scotland. After that night of miracles, he could not face the fury of his Aesir kin. In returning to Gotland today, he was in as much peril as the commandos.

"No, Marlowe. Loki's not a spy. I haven't any idea what on God's green Earth he is--


"--but I'd bet my life he's not a spy."

Like most Americans, Chris was convinced these beings weren't the ancient Norse gods—recalled into the modern world—any more than Sandy Koufax didn't pitch for Brooklyn.
Aliens—that was the official line—the story broadcast by Allied Radio all through the Americas and Japan and what remained of Free Asia. *Invaders from space* had come, as in those stories by sci-fi author Chester Nimitz.
No wonder they chose to side with the Nazis. Their ruse—pretending to be "gods"—would never have worked in the West! There, scientists would probe. People would ask questions.
But in the Teutonic madness of Nazism, these "Aesir" found fertile ground.
Chris had read captured German SS documents. Even back in the thirties and forties, they were filled with mumbo jumbo and pseudoreligious mysticism—stuff about "spears of destiny," ice moons falling from the sky, and romantic fables of an Aryan super race.


A Nazi-conquered world would *belong* to the Aesir, whoever and whatever they really were. They would be gods indeed.
Much as he understood the logic of a rat or a hyena, Chris could follow the aliens' reason for choosing the side they had, God damn them.


The two lead boats were crammed with Marines, to secure a beachhead and move inland. Navy men would prep the boats for getaway—

—as if anyone believed that would ever happen.
The last two craft held most of Chris's demolition team.
Yet, even as the shore neared, Chris found himself staring at Loki.

All Chris knew for certain was they had to be defeated, or for humanity there would be nothing but darkness, from now on.

Checking his watch, he looked up at the sky.

Yes, there it was. The Satellite. Riding Newton's wings more than two hundred miles up, circling the globe every ninety minutes.

When it first appeared, the Nazis had gone into a paroxysm, proclaiming it an astrological portent. For some unknown bureaucratic reason, officials in the Pentagon sat on the secret until half the world believed Goebbels's propaganda.

Then, at last, Washington revealed the truth.

American Space-Argonauts were circling the Earth.

For a month the world seemed turned around. This new technological wonder would be more important than the A-bomb!

Then the invasion of Canada began.

Chris turned his mind away from what was happening now, in the Atlantic. He wished he had one of those new "laser" communicators, so he could tell the men in the Satellite how things were progressing down here. But the light amplification devices were so secret, the Chiefs refused to let any be taken into the enemy's heartland.
Were the Nazis working on a way to shoot down the Satellite? How, with the aliens to help them, could the enemy let their early lead in rocketry slip so badly?
Perhaps they can't operate in space anymore-- as they haven't been able to crush our submarine force.
But how could aliens be unable to destroy such a crude spacecraft?
Chris shook his head.
Not that it matters. Tonight the Atlantic Fleet is dying. This winter we'll be forced to use big bombs--wrecking the continent even if we slow them down.
He looked at the figure in the boat's prow.
How can cleverness or industry prevail against such power?
Those fur-covered shoulders were passive now. But Chris had seen Loki tear down buildings with his hands. And Loki admitted to being one of the weakest of these "gods."

THOU ART TROUBLED, YOUNGLING. I SPY IT IN THY HEART.
NOT FEAR--BUT GREAT PERPLEXITY.
ON THIS FATEFUL EVE, I'LL FAVOR THEE, MORTAL. ASK THREE QUESTIONS. THESE WILL LOKI ANSWER TRUTHFULLY, BY HIS VERY LIFE.
Chris blinked, speechless. Everyone from President Marshall and Admiral Heinlein down to the lowliest draftee hungered for answers. Imperious and aloof, their one Aesir ally had doled out hints, helped to foil Nazi schemes, and slow the enemy advance. But he never made a promise like this!
I-- who *are* you, and where did you come from?

"Out of the body of Ymir, slain by ODIN, poured the Sea.
"Gripping the body of Ymir, YGGDRASIL, the great tree.
"Sprung from salt and frost, the AESIR, tremble Earth!
"Born of Giant and man, LOKI, bringer of mirth."
THIS HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY HOME.
I REMEMBER AGES AND EVERYTHING SPOKEN OF IN THE EDDAS--FROM THE CHAINING OF FENRIS TO THE LIES OF SKRYMNIR. AND YET--
AND YET THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THOSE MEMORIES--SOMETHING *LAID OVER*, AS LICHEN LIES UPON THE FROST. MY BROTHERS AND COUSINS BELIEVE IT ALL.

BUT IN TRUTH... I CANNOT SAY FOR CERTAIN THAT I AM OLDER THAN THEE, CHILD-MAN.

HASTEN YOUR NEXT QUESTION. WE APPROACH THE GATHERING PLACE OF THE GODS.
Uh...you're sure about this plan--taking on so many Aesir at once?
NO, I AM NOT SURE, IMPERTINENT MORTAL! THINK THOU THAT ONLY MEN MAY WIN HONOR BY DARING ALL AGAINST DEATH?
HERE DOES LOKI SHOW COURAGE, TO FACE ODIN'S SPEAR AND THOR'S HAMMER IF NEED BE, TONIGHT!
Chris saw Marines already ashore. He hurried another question.
Loki, what's happening in Africa?
Since '49 the Dark Continent had been silent. From Tunis to the Cape of Good Hope, fires burned, and rumors of horror flowed.

"Surtur must needs have a home, before the time of raging.
"There, in torment, men cry out, screaming for an ending."
IN AFRICA AND ON THE GREAT PLAINS OF RUSSIA, TERRIBLE MAGICS ARE BEING MADE, AND TERRIBLE WOE.
Terrible magics...
You mean the purpose isn't *only* to slaughter people? That something else is going on as well? Is that why you saved people from the first camps?
Was something being *done* to them?
NO MORE QUESTIONS. IT IS TIME.

Damn Loki and his riddle games! He was toying with Chris, laughing at him for having come close, yet missing the target.
There must be more to tonight's venture than he had realized. Levels under levels.
No matter, he thought. So long as we get this done.
Reet freaking hideaway, daddy-o. A heavy-duty scene.
Right, Zap. A heavy-duty scene.
Climbing a narrow trail, Chris felt at the navel of the world. For well or ill, destiny hung on this moment, this place.
To sear this Baltic island clean, he was willing to stand by the bomb and trigger it himself.
Few men ever had a chance to trade their lives so well.
There's a flat spot where we can assemble...

Let's cut it close on the trigger.
We should ship off Marlowe and his boys. You and I can stay and--
What?
Loki--?

A mortar--?
Dig it, man.

Not a mortar. Thor's hammer.
=koff= can't... breathe...
Where...
...the hell is Loki?

THERE, THERE, HUGIN. FEAR NOT THE DARK AMERICANS. THEY SHALL NOT HURT THEE.

ALAS. HUGIN HAS NOT FORGIVEN YOU, MY AMERICAN GUESTS. HIS BROTHER, MUNIN, WAS LOST WHEN BERLIN BURNED UNDER YOUR HELLFIRE BOMBS.
AND WHO CAN BLAME MY POOR WATCH-BIRD? MINE IS A FATHER'S GRIEF, FOR THAT SAME FLAME DELUGE CONSUMED MY OWN BRIGHT BOY, MY FAR-SEEING HEIMDALLR.
Higgins!
Yeah, they got your precious boy in Berlin. After you killed every Londoner! I say the Yanks were too soft. They shoulda gone ahead, whatever the price! Fried every Aryan bitch and cub--

ENOUGH!

TAKE THAT ONE TO THE GREAT CIRCLE, TO BE SENT TO VALHALLA. I WANT THAT BRAVE MAN WITH ME, WHEN THE FIMBUL-WINTER BLOWS.

THOR, MY SON. THESE OTHERS ARE THINE. POOR PRIZES, BUT THEY SHOWED SOME PROWESS IN FOLLOWING THE LIAR THIS FAR. WHAT WILL THOU DO WITH THEM?
I WILL DEIGN TO SPEAK WITH ONE OR TWO OF THEM, FATHER.
CAST THEM IN A PIT TO AWAIT MY SON'S PLEASURE.
FIND OUT WHAT YOU CAN ABOUT THAT WOLF-SPAWN, LOKI. THEN SEND THEM TO THE CIRCLE.

For hours, Chris sat in the dungeon, with his thoughts. With unwanted memories. Major Marlowe had been right about one thing. The Nazis would never have won without the Aesir, or something like them. Hitler and his gang must have believed from the start that they could somehow call forth ancient "gods," or they surely wouldn't have dared wage such a war, certain to bring in America.

Indeed, by early 1944 it seemed all but over. There was still Hell to pay, of course, but nobody back home feared defeat anymore. The Russians were pushing from the East. Rome would soon fall and the Mediterranean was an Allied lake. The Japanese Empire crumbled—driven back or bottled in island after island—while the greatest armada of all time gathered in England, preparing to cross the Channel and lance the Nazi boil for good and all.

In factories and shipyards, the Arsenal of Democracy poured forth more materiel per month than the Third Reich produced in its best year. Ships rolled off the ways at intervals of hours. Planes every few minutes…

…while a rabble of farmers and city boys in soldier suits became tempered warriors in a great army, on a par with their experienced foe, and outnumbering the enemy as well.

Already there was talk of postwar recovery, rebuilding, and a "United Nations" to keep the peace forever.

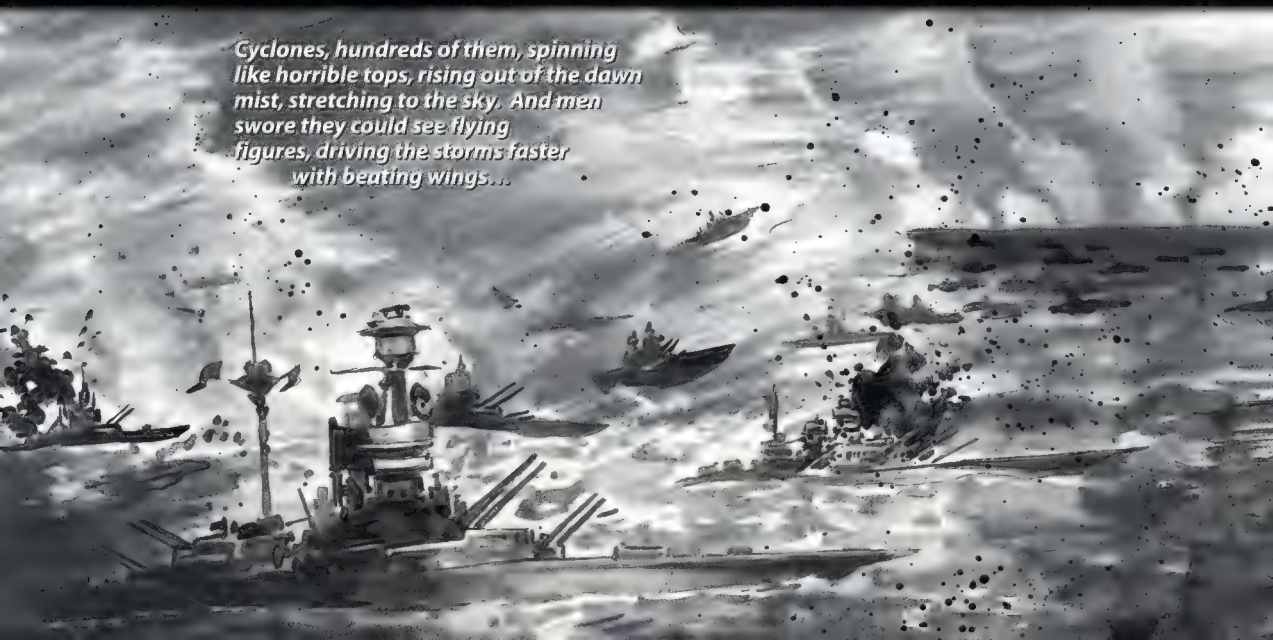
Chris had been a child in knee pants, back in '44, devouring Chet Nimitz novels and praying that there would be something half as glorious to do in his adulthood as what his uncles were then achieving overseas. Maybe adventures in space! For after this, the horror of war would surely never be allowed again.

Then came rumors—tales of setbacks on the Eastern Front—of reeling Soviet armies sent into sudden and unexpected retreat. The reasons were unclear—mostly, what came back were superstitious rumblings, beyond belief.

Voices on a street corner...
Damn Russkies-- I knew all along they didn't have no stayin' power--alla time yammerin' about a "Second Front"...
...well, we'll give 'em a Second Front! Save their hash--don't fret, Ivan. Uncle Sam's coming...

June 1944, and the Norman sky was filled with planes. Ships covered the Channel Sea...
...ships as far as the eye could see—the greatest armada of free men ever assembled.

Not until he joined the OSS did Chris see photos never shown to the public. In all the years since, he wished he hadn't.
D-Day... D for disaster.


Cyclones, hundreds of them, spinning like horrible tops, rising out of the dawn mist, stretching to the sky. And men swore they could see flying figures, driving the storms faster with beating wings...

Marlowe's come up aces and eights. You're the big cheese now, dad.
So what gives now, chief?
What *gives* is that you damp the beat-rap, Leary. Make just every *third* sentence incomprehensible. That should provide your emotional crutch.
Never mind. How are the men doing?
Copacetic--I mean, they're okay, for guys slated for ritual shortening soon. Just wanted to take more of the bastards with 'em.
Chris nodded. If we had another year or two--by then we'd have rockets accurate enough for a surgical strike, instead of trying to sneak a bomb in by submarine. The Orbital Satellite was just the beginning...if we had time.

By the time we had enough bombs to do much, they had atomic weapons, too.
Higgins was right, man. We shoulda pasted them with everything we had. Melted Europe to slag, if that's what it took.

So? After we fried Peenemunde, their delivery systems stagnated. And they haven't got a clue how to go thermonuclear! Even if they did manage to disassemble the bomb we brought--
God forbid!
I scoped--I mean I checked the destruct triggers myself, Chris.
Anyone pokes around to try to see how a U.S. of A. type H-bomb works will be in for a nasty surprise.
I still think we should have launched everything in '52.
Most Americans agreed with Leary. A full strike, searing the heart out of Hitler's homeland. Worth enduring the monster's retaliation, with crude rockets and fission bombs.
When he learned the *real* reason for Allied restraint, Chris could not believe it.
But top scientists verified—America's arsenal was double-edged. It could cut both ways.

The great Thor would deign to speak vit' your leader.
This one. This strayed sheep. Our lord asked for him.

Cool as glass, daddy-o. Drive 'em crazy, baby.
You too, Leary. Stay...hip, man.

You are a Dane, are you not?
Danish grandparents. What of it?
I am amazed when I find specimens of superior stock fighting against their own divine heritage.
Do you interrogate a lot of prisoners?
Oh, yes, very many.
Then you must be *amazed* all the time.
But doesn't your blood cry out when you find yourself working with--going into battle alongside racial scum, mongrels--?
HA!
Why are you even here?
I--what do you mean? See here now, *I* am in charge of interrogating--
You're in charge of a *jail detail*. Priests of the Aesir run everything now. SS mystics control the Reich. Hitler is a tottering old syphilitic they won't let out of Bertchesgaden. You old-fashioned Nazis are barely tolerated anymore.

What do you mean by that?
I mean all that racial garbage was just window dressing. An excuse to set up the death camps. But the SS would've been just as happy to use *Aryans* in them, if that was the only way to--
To do what? If the purpose of the camps was not elimination of impure stock, then what, smart man? *What?*
You don't know, do you? Even Loki did not tell you!
No, I wasted a question, and lost my chance.
Poor obsolete National Socialist. Your dreams, though mad, were human ones. How does it feel to have them all taken over by aliens? To watch it all change beyond recognition?
I will change something *else* beyond recognition. And if I'm obsolete, I am still allowed the pleasure of my craft.
YOU MAY GO.

FRØ SENDS WØRD FRØM VINLAND-- FRØM THE SEA THØU CALLEST LABRADØR. THERE HAS BEEN A SLAUGHTER ØF MANY BRAVE MEN.
THØSE CØWARDS' TØØLS-- "SUBMARINES"--DID MUCH HARM TØ ØUR FLEET. BUT FRØ'S TEMPESTS WERE MASTERFUL. THE LANDING WAS SECURED.
WE HAVE CØME TØ AMERICA.
THIS IS A STRANGE KIND ØF WAR. WHERE IS HØNØR, WHEN THØUSANDS DIE UNABLE TØ SHØW VALØR?
Chris had some experience conversing with "gods." He took a chance, speaking without permission.
I agree, Great One. But you can't blame us for that.
NØ, BRAVE WØRM. I DØN'T. THAT YØU USED YØUR FLAME WEAPØNS SØ LITTLE SPEAKS WELL FØR THE PRIDE ØF YØUR LEADERS.
ØR PERHAPS THEY FEAR ØUR WRATH, IF THEY USE THEM WANTØNLY.

I never should have been allowed on this mission. I know too much, Chris realized.
Loki had been the one to overrule High Command and insist that Chris come along. That made him the only one here who knew the secret reason—the real reason—why the H-bombs were kept leashed.
Dust from atom blasts, and soot from burning cities. Allied Command feared those more than radiation or Nazi retaliation.
We too prefer a more personal approach. No man wishes to be killed by powers beyond his understanding, impossible to resist.
HA! WELL SAID. THOU DOST CHASTIZE LIKE FREYR--WORDS THAT REAP, AS THEY SOW.
BUT NOW, SPEAK TO ME OF LOKI.
YOU WILL EARN MERIT, SMALL ONE, IF YOU TELL ME HOW TO FIND THE BROTHER OF LIES.
Those gray eyes were like ice. Reality wavered as Chris looked into them.
With all his will, he tore his gaze away, shutting his eyes.
Chris spoke with a dry mouth.
I--don't know what you're talking about.
LOKI, YOUNGLING. SAY WHERE THE TRICKSTER CAN BE FOUND, AND YOU MAY ESCAPE YOUR DOOM. IN THE COMING WORLD, THERE WILL BE NO GREATER PLACE FOR A MAN THAN BY MY SIDE.

Chris steeled himself to meet the hypnotic pools. Thor's eyes seemed to reach for his soul, like a magnet calling native iron. He fought back with the savage heat of hatred.
Not-- for all the Valkyries in your alien pantheon.
I'd rather run with pigs.
COURAGE WILL NOT SAVE THEE FROM THE WAGES OF DISRESPECT, WORM.
All at once, Chris felt glad to know Leary.
Don't you dig it, daddy-o?
I don't freakin' *believe* in you! Wherever you're from, baby, they probably kicked you out!
You Aesir may wreck our world, but everything about you screams the *dregs*, man. Leaky squares. Probably burned out Papa's stolen saucer gettin' here!
I just refuse to believe in you, man.
Did Chris hallucinate? Or did Thor *waver* for a moment, rocked by his disbelief?
Whatever happened... it could not last.
I DID NOT KEN YOUR OTHER INSULTS. BUT FOR CALLING ME *MAN*, YOU SHALL DIE AS YOU SEEM TO WISH, BEFORE THE MORNING SUN.
I ONLY ADD THIS, LITTLE MORTAL. WE AESIR CAME *INVITED*.
AND WE ARRIVED NOT IN SHIPS, BUT ON THE WINGS OF DEATH.
THIS BOON OF KNOWLEDGE I GRANT THEE, IN HONOR OF YOUR DEFIANCE.

The Teutonic priests chanted in a language that sounded vaguely German, but much older. Over pounding drums, Leary had to shout to be heard.

Fro must be back from Labrador. That explains the clear night. He's the god of tempests.

Dammit, Leary. I told you, they're not--

Sorry, man. I mean he's th' little green alien who's in charge of weather control. Make you feel better?

I don't suppose it matters now. Sorry, Zap.

It's okay, man. Copacetic.

Only... I just remembered something, Chris.

What is it now?

I can't see how it slipped my mind.....back on the beach, old Loki pulled me aside. It was hectic...but I swear he palmed th' bomb's trigger. That means--

So he knew we'd be captured. Figures. At least the Nazis won't get the trigger.

But there's more. I just remembered. Loki told me to *tell* you something later. You asked him a question. He told me the answer. Said you'd understand.

Don't know why I forgot till now.

Chris laughed harshly. The renegade Aes must have given Leary a posthypnotic command—to recall the message later, in a situation like this.

One without escape.

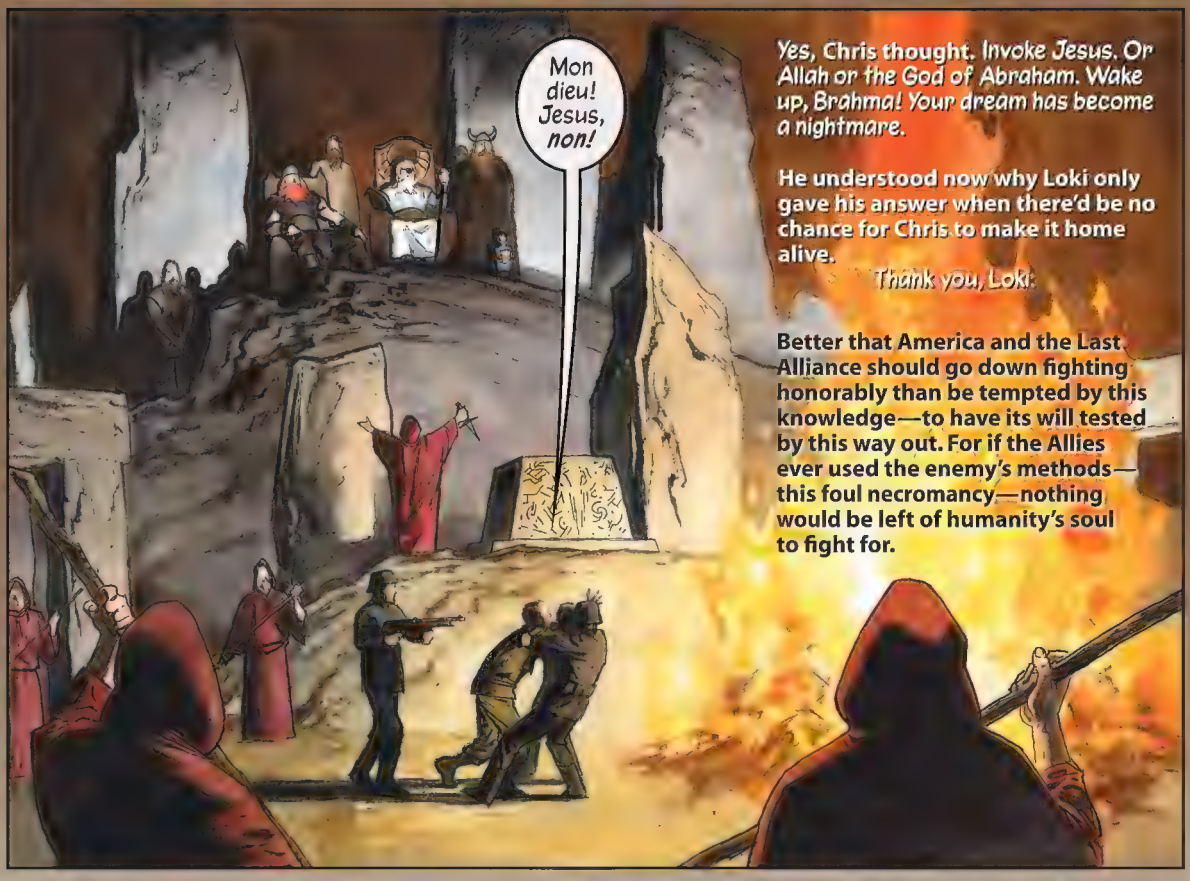
What is it, Zap? What did Loki say?

Just one word, Chris. Before Thor jumped us, Loki said to tell you-- *necromancy.*

What'd he mean by that, Captain? What was your question?

Chris stared at a funnel of sparks climbing toward the Moon.
With his last question he had asked Loki about the camps—about the awesome, horrible, concentrated effort of death that had been perpetrated, first in Europe, then Russia and Africa. What were they *for?* So systematic. Industrialized. There had to be more to it than eliminating bothersome minorities.
Moreover, why had Loki, who normally seemed oblivious to human life, acted to rescue so many from the death factories, at great risk to himself?
Necromancy. That was Loki's delayed reply, told in such a way that Chris might have his answer, but never tell anyone who mattered...
Necromancy—
The word stood for the performance of magic, but magic of a special, terrible kind. In legend, a necromancer used the death agony of human beings to drive his spells. A majority of old human cultures had dabbled in the notion, some of them passionately.
But that was superstitious nonsense!
Wasn't it?
Light-headed under the persistent chanting, Chris looked across the sand at the hulking Aesir, seated on their gilded thrones, wishing he could dismiss the idea.
Was *that* why the Nazis had dared to wage such a war? Because they believed they could *industrialize* magic? Perform human sacrifice in vast, controlled batches? Create such distilled horror that the ancient spells would actually work?
It explained so much. Across history, other nations had gone insane. Other movements had been evil or tried awful wizardries. But none perpetrated murder with such dedicated efficiency. The horror must have been directed not so much at death itself, but at some hideous goal *beyond* death!
Chris murmured half-aloud, in shock.
"They...*made*...the Aesir! That's what Loki meant when he said his own memories might be false--that he might be no older than I am..."

The High Priest held a golden sword before Odin, while guards unchained a screaming prisoner—a Free Frenchman—dragging him to the altar.
NON!
Buck up, men!


Mon dieu! Jesus, non!
Yes, Chris thought. Invoke Jesus. Or Allah or the God of Abraham. Wake up, Brahma! Your dream has become a nightmare.
He understood now why Loki only gave his answer when there'd be no chance for Chris to make it home alive.
Thank you, Loki.
Better that America and the Last Alliance should go down fighting honorably than be tempted by this knowledge—to have its will tested by this way out. For if the Allies ever used the enemy's methods—this foul necromancy—nothing would be left of humanity's soul to fight for.

Who would we Americans conjure, Chris wondered, if we used those spells? Superman? Captain Marvel? Oh, they'd be more than a match for the Aesir! Our myths were boundless.

He laughed, and the sound turned into a sob as another scream of agony pierced the night.

Thank you, Loki, for sparing us that test of our souls.

He had no idea where the renegade "trickster god" went, or if this debacle was only a cloak for some deeper, more secret mission. Could that be? Chris wondered. President Marshall wouldn't tell an OSS Captain everything. This mission could be a feint, a minor piece in a greater plan.

Lasers and satellites--they could be just part of it. There may be a silver bullet--a thorn of mistletoe, still.

Chris looked skyward and a thought struck him, as if from nowhere.

Legends begin in strange ways.

Even without a miracle—the horror would *have* to ebb someday. When humans grew scarce, perhaps. When the "gods" were less plump from the death manna of charnel houses.

Then *human heroes* might count for something again. Perhaps in secret laboratories, or in exile on the Moon or the bottom of the sea, free men and women would toil to build the armor, the weapons, maybe the heroes themselves…

To his amazement, Chris felt feather-light, as if gravity barely mattered.

So long, Leary.
Someday men will challenge these monsters, Chris thought. Revenge will drive our descendants. Science will armor them. But those heroes will need something more.
Yeah, man. Stay cool.

Move, swine!
Vas--?
AAACH--
:Uuhff:
:Gnnk!:
AAII--!

Hysterical strength, of course.
Chris realized what Loki had done to him. No human could do these things without being used up.
Did it matter? This was more fun than he had expected to be having now.
YAAAAA!
All witnessed the craven deed...
...as Odin attacked from behind...
...and Chris somehow seized the Spear of Destiny. Impaler of Worlds.

No one moved; Thor's whirling hammer slowed, then dropped. In the silence, Chris knew his left femur had shattered—along with most of the bones in his hands—leaving him perched on one leg.

Yet his sole regret was that he could not emulate an aged Jew he had heard spoken of by some concentration camp survivors.

Standing in front of the grave he had been forced to dig for himself, the old man never begged, or cried to the SS, nor slumped in despair. He just turned from his murderers, dropped his pants, and said aloud in Yiddish as he bent over, "*Kish mir im toches.*"

As more guards rushed to grab his arms, Chris met Thor's icy gaze.

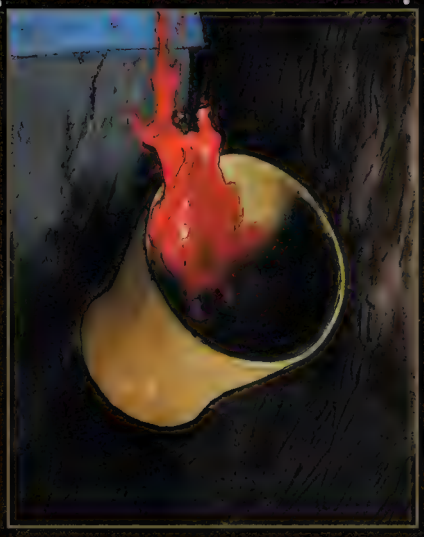
"Kiss my ass," he told the towering Aesir.

"I don't believe in you."

Quaking with fear, the Nordic Priests bound Chris to the altar. All that time he kept his gaze on Thor.

Then we all saw IT happen. Something mortals would remember.

Thor blinked first. The giant shivered… and looked away.



Chris laughed out loud then, knowing that nothing in the world could stop this story.

Loki, you bastard. You used me, and I guess I should thank you.

But rest assured, Loki, someday we'll get you, too.

He laughed again as the dismayed High Priest fumbled the knife. A trembling acolyte dropped his swastika banner and Chris roared.

Then came Leary's high-pitched giggle. Another prisoner barked a hoarse guffaw, and another.

Across the chilly Baltic, where all had been still, an uncertain wind now rose, unbidden, blowing from the West.

And overhead, a swift new glimmer sailed, where older stars merely drifted across the sky.

- PART TWO -
"WEATHERMEN"

Was this a face to be oppos'd
against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep
dread-bolted thunder?

– William Shakespeare,
King Lear

Of course the world went on.

It tends to do that, when your heart keeps beating, which mine did, even amid the long, harsh winter that followed.

I quickly understood that our new lords had limitations. Despite their awesome powers, they could not read minds...

...or else I would never have survived.

Pretending to be devoted, I learned to keep my thoughts hidden. To do as I was told. To give trust sparingly.

To conceal what I learned that night under Valhalla's bitter stars.

And so, amid that maelstrom of conquest and pain, I received advancement--

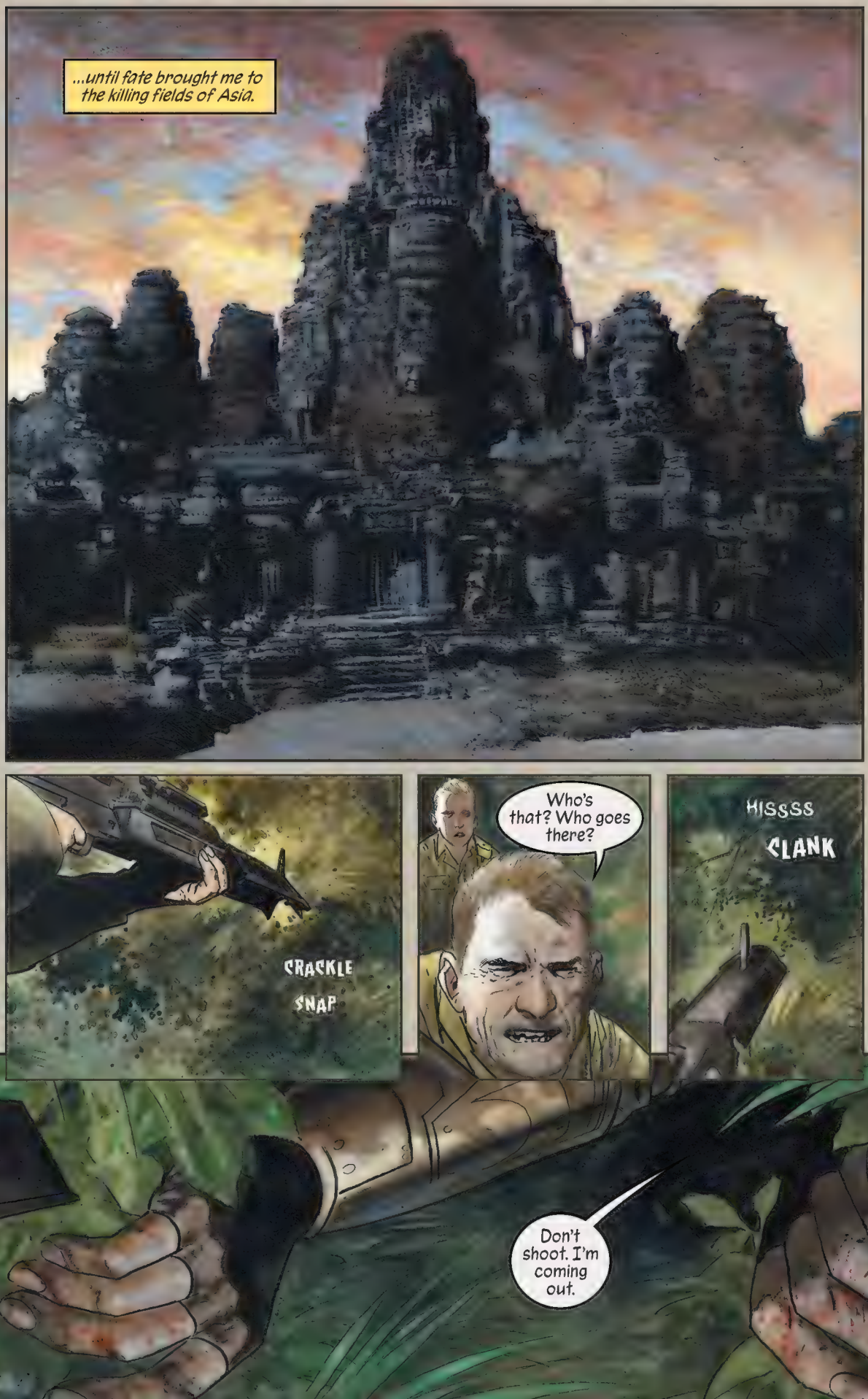
--first from cup-bearer to courier, in simple black uniform, rushing commands to the servants of the Aesir as they went about the task of "cleansing" North America.

Later, I served in roles befitting a trusted warrior--leading units of American draftees into battle...

...rooting out cells of stubborn resistance...

...and using clever American technologies to help extend the realm my masters controlled...

...where they could feed their burning hunger...


...until fate brought me to the killing fields of Asia.
CRACKLE
SNAP
Who's that? Who goes there?
HISSSS
CLANK
Don't shoot. I'm coming out.

Oh, it's you, Perez.
HSSSS
Why are you walking?
Don't you Mobile Infantry guys prefer to leap over trees in a single bound?
Damn power suit jammed. Had to drag it all the way back.
Harsh. Why don't you ditch it?
Can't. Our quartermaster is a Nazi. He'd ship me to the camps for sure.
You're alone. Then Smith and Carlson...
Gone. We were ambushed.

Ambushed...
...by humans?
I guess so. They used guns.
But keep your eyes open...
...there are other things in that jungle.

What was he talking about? What other things?
Some of the harvesting parties that we sent up-country were wiped out. A few survivors...
...babbled about a new kind of enemy.
One that bullets barely touch.
You mean...like the Aesir?
Maybe worse. At least the Aesir--
Post Twelve reporting, we're under attack!
It's the Khmer Bleu again!
I *hope* it's the Khmers. They're human.

We were promised *artillery*...Aesir support...
The enemy...
...they've broken the whole perimeter.
My God... Sarge, what'll we do? Sarge?
Sarge?

NOOOO!

Uh, thanks...but who...
...sulp?...
I seek a man...
...Corporal Joseph Kasting.
Would this be you?
D-depends. What d'you want him for?
You question me? Very well.
I want to remove Professor Kasting from this.
Uh... in that case...I'm Kasting.

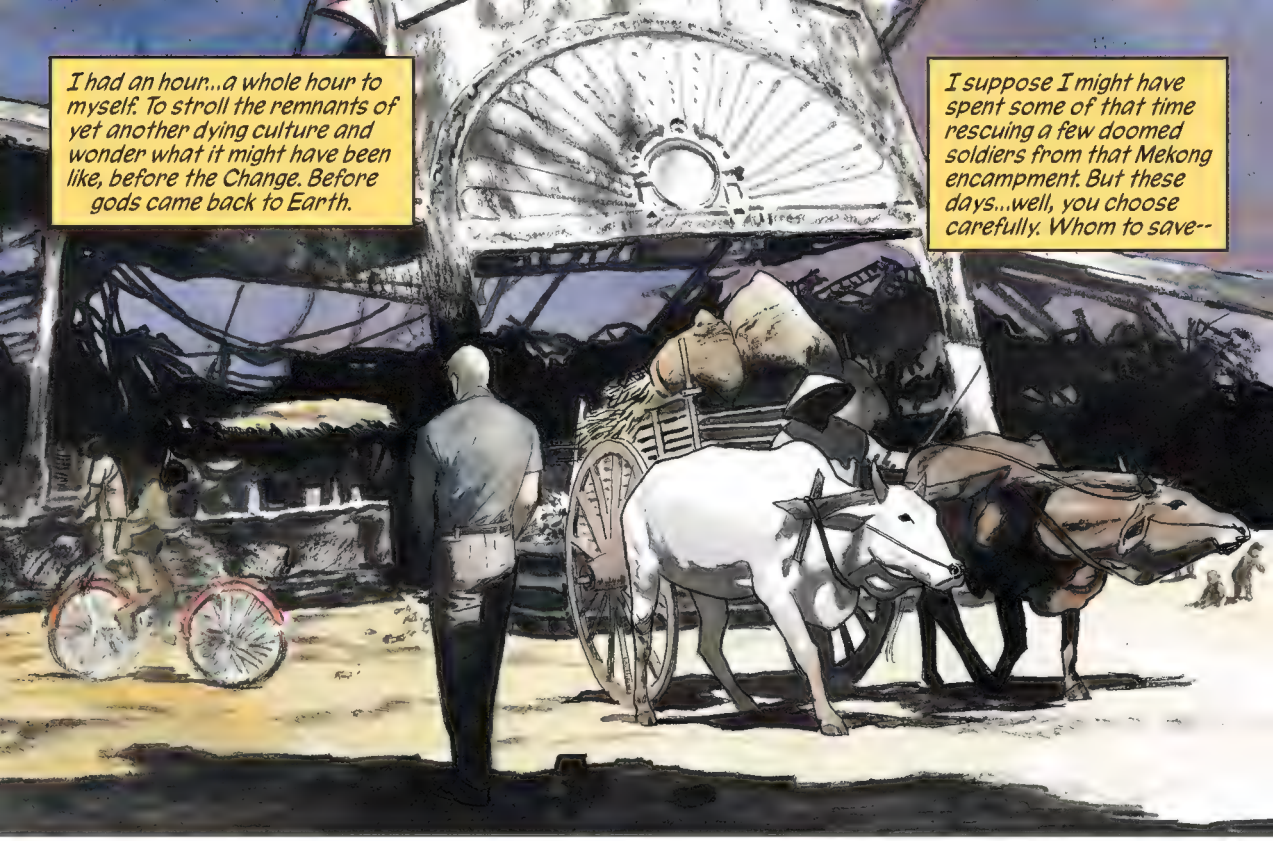
Can you help them?
I cannot...
...in any event, that's not my mission.

So it was that my life path crossed that of the Weather Man...
...as I brought him to meet my master...
...in the sweaty place called Da Nang.

Clean and feed him. Swiftly now. We are expected before one of the great ones, in just over an hour.

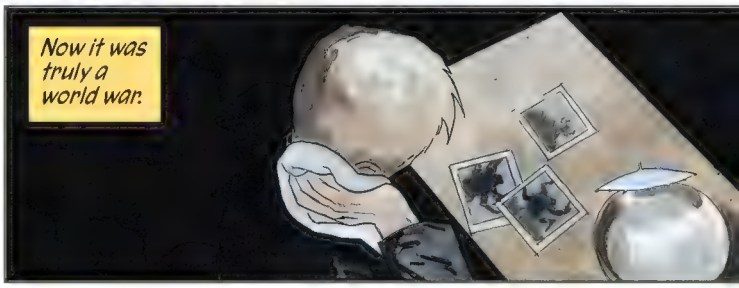
Uh...I guess I should thank you...

By tonight, you may wish I left you in the jungle.
I had come far since a little boy watched Chris Turing die on Gotland, years ago, rising as high as any human could--
--from cup-bearer to trusted agent-of-the gods.
And yet, how often had I wished to find some jungle? Some place to hide?


I had an hour...a whole hour to myself. To stroll the remnants of yet another dying culture and wonder what it might have been like, before the Change. Before gods came back to Earth.
I suppose I might have spent some of that time rescuing a few doomed soldiers from that Mekong encampment. But these days...well, you choose carefully. Whom to save--

--and whom to sacrifice. For the gods had a never-slaked hunger. And there remained millions upon millions to serve up--

--though here, in Asia, it seemed that the Aesir had met competition at last.


Now it was truly a world war.

As usual, humanity would be the loser.

Thanks, man. I needed a bath. So what's this all about?
It's cold! Who could possibly need so much air condi--
Oh.
Great Thor, I have brought the man who might answer the riddle of the fires.

Riddles? But I was just a meteorologist.
That is, till my big mouth landed me in the Ar--
--urk!
SHOW HIM THE RIDDLE.
Whenever did a lowly corporal receive such a high-level briefing? Joe Kasting stared in amazement at a map revealing the secret condition of the world, never revealed to ignorant populations back home.
Dark blue marked the domain secured so far by the Aesir and their human vassals...

...while green represented areas won by their close allies, the Shinto gods.

Against those green and blue tides stood--marked in red--regions held by their fearsome **new foes**...

...risen out of Asian myths and African desperation...

...along with other tropical frothings of blood and bitter fear.

So, we've got *blue* and *green* gods...fighting together against all kinds of *red* gods.
What fun.
What's going on in all those places that're marked *yellow?*
The Abrahamites--
WE SHALL NOT TALK OF SUCH THINGS.
THE *FIRES.* SHOW THIS WORM THE FIRES.
Those look like...
...somebody ignited a whole field of oil wells.
Millions of barrels go up every day, in a hundred fields, all across the tropics.
But...why would your enemies set fire to their *own* petroleum reserves? The lost resources...
...though of course there's not as much need for oil anymore. Less industry...no private cars. Still, what purpose can it serve, except...

I could see it in his eyes. The one emotion that no god or Aesir could experience or understand...
...realization. The kind that a human scientist gets when, suddenly, a curtain parts...
...and he knows.
Uh...I can't be sure... that is...
...not from a few blurry photos.
Fortunately for this human--and for me--my master was no judge of liars.
WOULDST THOU BE SURE AFTER HAVING A CLOSER LOOK?
You mean go there? The enemy...the fires?
Wait, I can--
He might spoil everything by panicking.
My Lord, I will take this one to see the burning fields.
He will unravel the scheme of thy foes. Else I'll unravel his intestines.

THEN GET HENCE TO SOLVE THE RIDDLE.
I LANGUISH IN THIS HEAT...
...THOUGH IT BE A PLACE WHERE FEASTING IS STILL GOOD.
What-- you mean right now?
Don't we need a mission plan?
Secret agent training? An infiltration team?
At least let me gather instruments.
You're leaving me *alone* up here? I can't fly a--
Remain calm. I'll do the flying.
But... this is no way to do science!

I tried to ignore Kasting's nervous commentary about a war-ravaged coastline--sunken vessels, burned-out towns and a slowly-poisoning sea. Becoming one with the plane, I flew. And flew, imagining that I was free.

The nearest fires were in Brunei...near what had been Indonesia...where once empires fought over rich resources. Spice and timber. Later, minerals and fuel.

*Now, the world's **super**powers were battling over something even more valuable. Asia's rich trove of human lives.*

*And yet, it seemed that something had made **petroleum** important once again.*

AGH!

We must eject!

Hands up!
Rest easy, son.
It's a good thing we were early to the rendezvous. You cut it close this time.
Who's *this?*
He is a weather man.
Now let's be off. It's not safe here and there's much to do.

And so, hurrying west through the Singapore Straits...
...we finally arrived at one of the last free refuges...
...Salvation Base Number Five. Sole outpost of the United Nations and the Free Americas in this part of the world.
For more than a thousand leagues across what had been called the Indian Ocean...
...the only place where men and women still breathed free.
I... never knew.

But how? How did you--
Come along. There's a group assembled to study the oil fires.
Then you already know.
We noticed the smoke plumes on satellite images...
...though it's hard to imagine why the "hot gods" would burn their own resources.

Joe Kasting, meet Professors Morton and Bulou. And Dr. Jane Chen.
We've met. Online, before they shut down the Internet.
We have?
You were "Storm Chaser." I kicked your butt in Dungeon and Multi-chess.

Questwoman? Wow. It's been...
I saw you at an AAAS meeting. The last one ever.
I saw *you.* Wanted to say hi.
Two shy students. We both figured there was time.

Time. Yeah. There always seemed so much of it.

Now there's little time to spare. Can we focus on our problem? Fires rage in Nigeria, Venezuela, Brunei...all ruled by monsters from the "hot" faction.
Destroying their own oil. Doesn't make sense.

Because you're not meteorologists. You didn't evacuate any as "essential personnel" from the mainland.
I bet you've got heaps of bombs, but not a single weather balloon.

Well, you're here *now,* Dr. Kasting. Tell us what you'll need to solve this puzzle.
We can fabricate instruments--

No instruments will be needed.
The Weather Man already knows.

Tell us now what you withheld from Thor.
The purpose of the fires.
I...it's only a conjecture.
If they have no use for petroleum, they must want...the product.
Product? They're making *smoke*. Heat, soot...carbon dioxide.
Right. A "hothouse gas"-- transparent to incoming sunshine. But CO_2 traps warm infra-red, like the windows of a greenhouse. It's why Venus broiled but Mars froze. One retained too much heat, the other, too little. While Earth--
"--is the Goldilocks World. Just right. Traces of methane and carbon dioxide hold enough heat to keep rain and liquid oceans. For ages, the only sources were a few volcanoes, plus the flatulence of cattle. Only now--
--someone decided to pour *lots* of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. I was puzzled at first, till I saw a reason. A mad reason--
--but with a logic all its own.
The enemies of the Aesir are trying to heat up the planet.

They're trying to... what?
Dig it. Norse gods like it cold. So do their Shinto allies. Old Thor was suffering in Da Nang.
But those tropical "gods" prefer heat. They'll keep this up till the ice caps melt!
How fast will it happen?
I need measurements. Access to an Eniac-brain, if you got one. Clearly the hot gods have slave scientists who did the math. Burning whole oil fields...could wreak havoc in a few years.
Havoc is right! Sea levels will rise...crops fail. The storms--unimaginable! Nature can't adapt that fast. Forests, species...they'll go extinct!
Extinct... like us.
Our gods have never been very good at looking at the long range.
You are leaving something out, Professor. What are you holding back?
I--I don't know if I should--
Tell us, Kasting. All of it.
The Aesir could fight back.

Now I understood why the scientist kept silent in Da Nang, despite threat of death. In his own way, this was a courageous man...
...though my lord Thor would never understand this kind of valor. With thin arms and glasses, Kasting would never be invited to stand near Odin in Valhalla.
Even one who held in his slim hands the key to Aesir victory.
For Joe Kasting knew an answer to the Riddle of the Fires.
The tropical gods hoped to fill the sky with gas that would trap heat upon the Earth, as a blanket holds warmth to the skin.
How to thwart this? **Block out the sun!**
Use giant bombs to fill the upper sky with **dust--**
--reflecting its warm rays, making even summer's daylight dim...
...welcoming the embrace of winter.
Welcoming an age of ice.

The leaders of Salvation Base Five could only stare. Till now they had seen this as a war against alien monsters--harsh, but far from hopeless.
Now they pictured the true bleakness of Earth's future--
--teetering between a doomsday of choking heat...or devastating cold.
Once the ice spreads, it will reflect more sunlight, reinforcing the trend...
Would they really...go that far?
A weather war...?
We have better bombs... and the Abrahamites have more oil than anybody.
We might tip the balance... favor one side...
...but nobody can win such a war. Earth will de-stabilize!
Heat death or Ice Age...
How could we choose?
If we told them the consequences... called a peace conference...
These are gods of death and war, risen from the worst attributes of men. Their angry gaze can only fix on the battle at hand... and their hunger.
They cannot grasp the future.
Well, that is not entirely true.

SOME OF US ARE KNOWN FOR LOOKING AHEAD...
Loki!
...EVEN IF IT IS ONLY TO THE NEXT BITTER JOKE.
JORMUNGAND, MY SON, GREAT SERPENT OF THE SEA! WRAP THE CAPTIVES SAFELY IN YOUR COILS AND COME!

Alarm! Aesir attack!
How many? Are there more?
I will find out.
Get those people out of there!

The second hatch won't hold that pressure. We've got to close the main!
Hold a sec. Look what he's doing!
Ready decompression chamber!
The Aesir never attacked down here before...!

Grab respirators from the wall! I'll seal the main hatch.
Lewis! Where are you?
The hatch! Is there time...?
Quick! He can't hold that hatch for long!
Lars! Report to security. You have some explaining to do--like how the Aesir found us!
Later--

--if I make it back at all.
BE CALM, YOUNG ONES.
IN TIME, YOU WILL BE GRATEFUL--
--FOR THE DESTINY I HAVE CHOSEN--
BY THE NORNS!

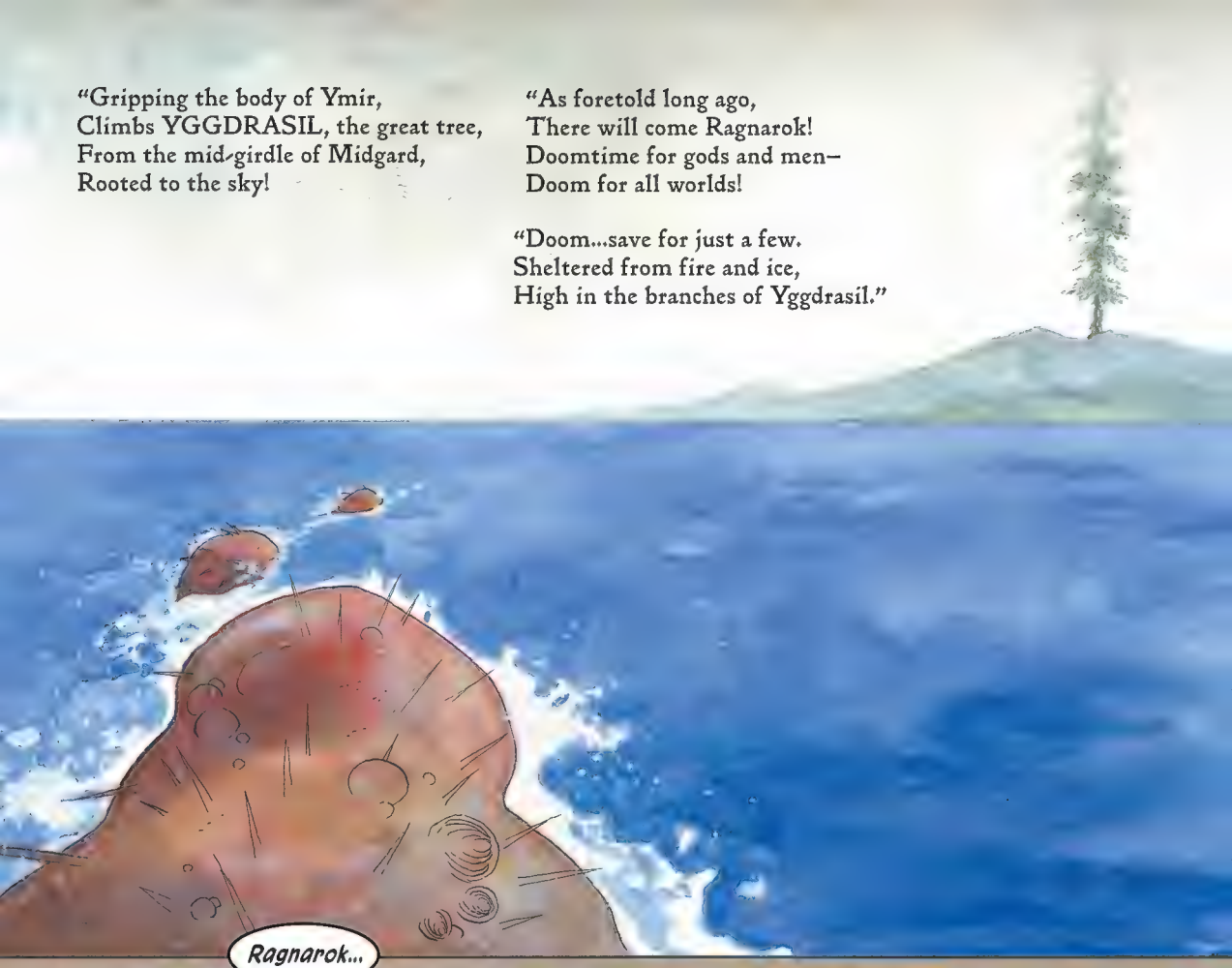
I've got you, hold on!

THIS IS BRAVE, BUT ILL-ADVISED. YOU KNOW NOT--
:UHN!:
THOUGH I AM LESS WELL-FED THAN MY BROTHERS, THE WORLD FLOWS WITH MORE THAN ENOUGH PAIN--
--TO KEEP ME STRONG.
BUT ENOUGH. YOU HAVE EARNED THE RIGHT TO SEE WHERE WE ARE GOING. THE SOLE HOPE FOR A PLANET OF WOE.
BEHOLD--

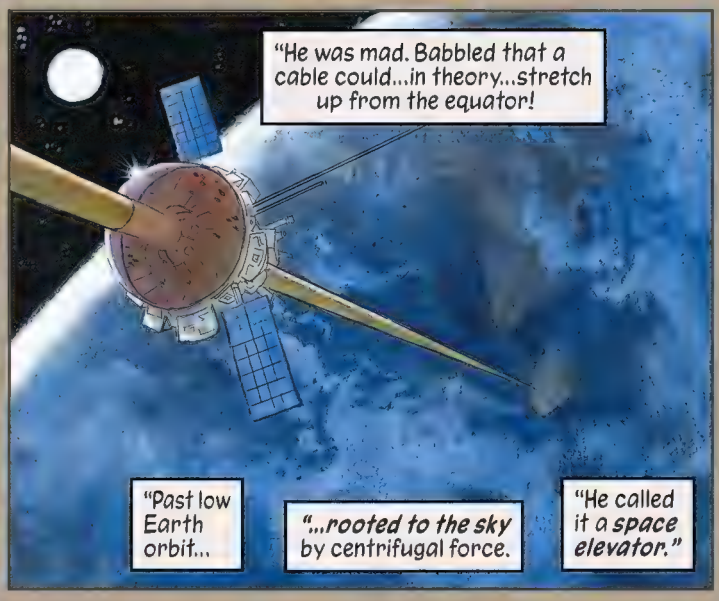
"Gripping the body of Ymir,
Climbs YGGDRASIL, the great tree,
From the mid-girdle of Midgard,
Rooted to the sky!

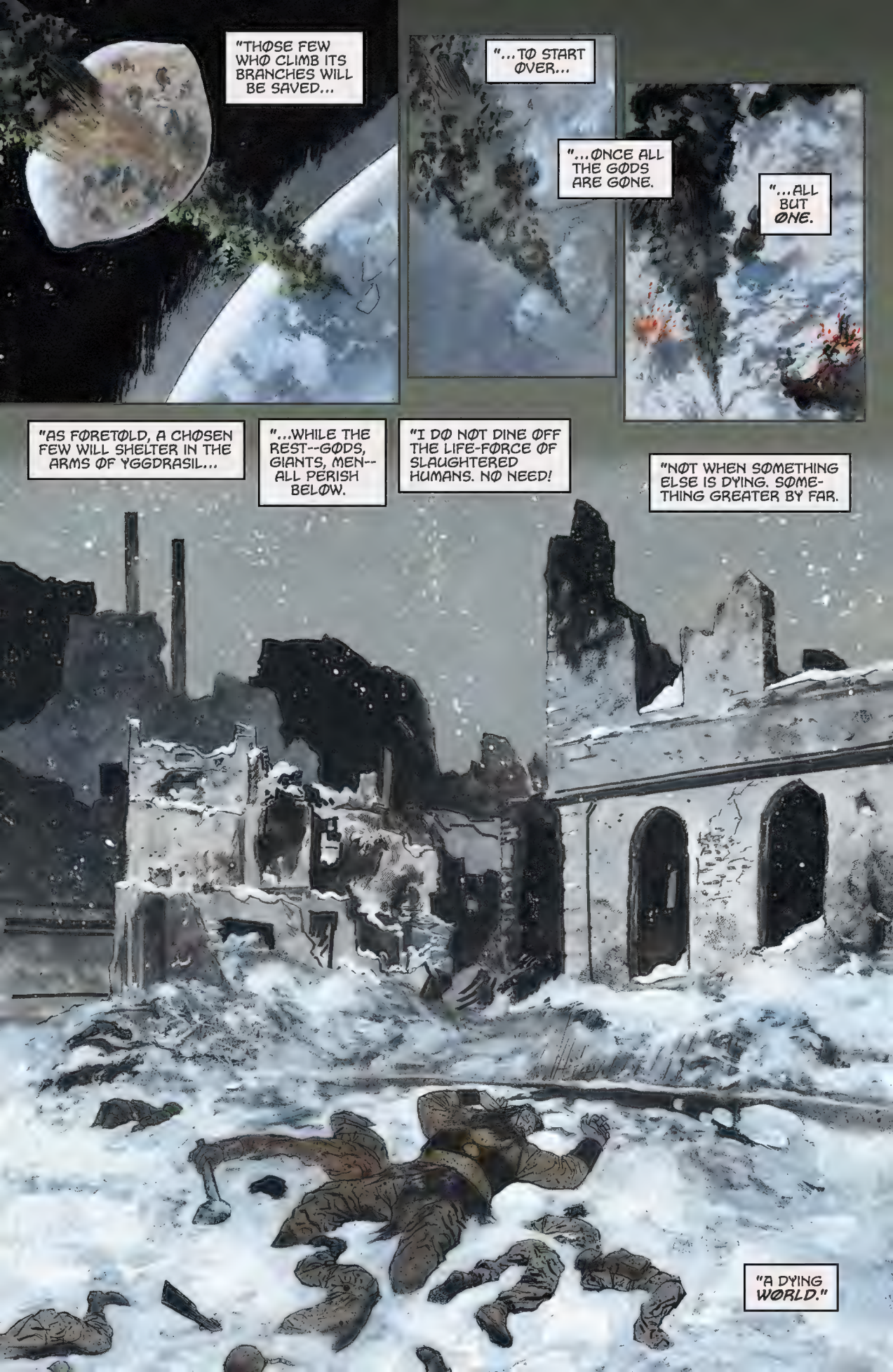
"As foretold long ago,
There will come Ragnarok!
Doomtime for gods and men–
Doom for all worlds!

"Doom...save for just a few.
Sheltered from fire and ice,
High in the branches of Yggdrasil."



Ragnarok...
...from the mid-girdle...he means the equator. That must be Ceylon.
But how can a tree be rooted to the sky?
I...met a scientist at Base Nine. A refugee from the horror in Russia.

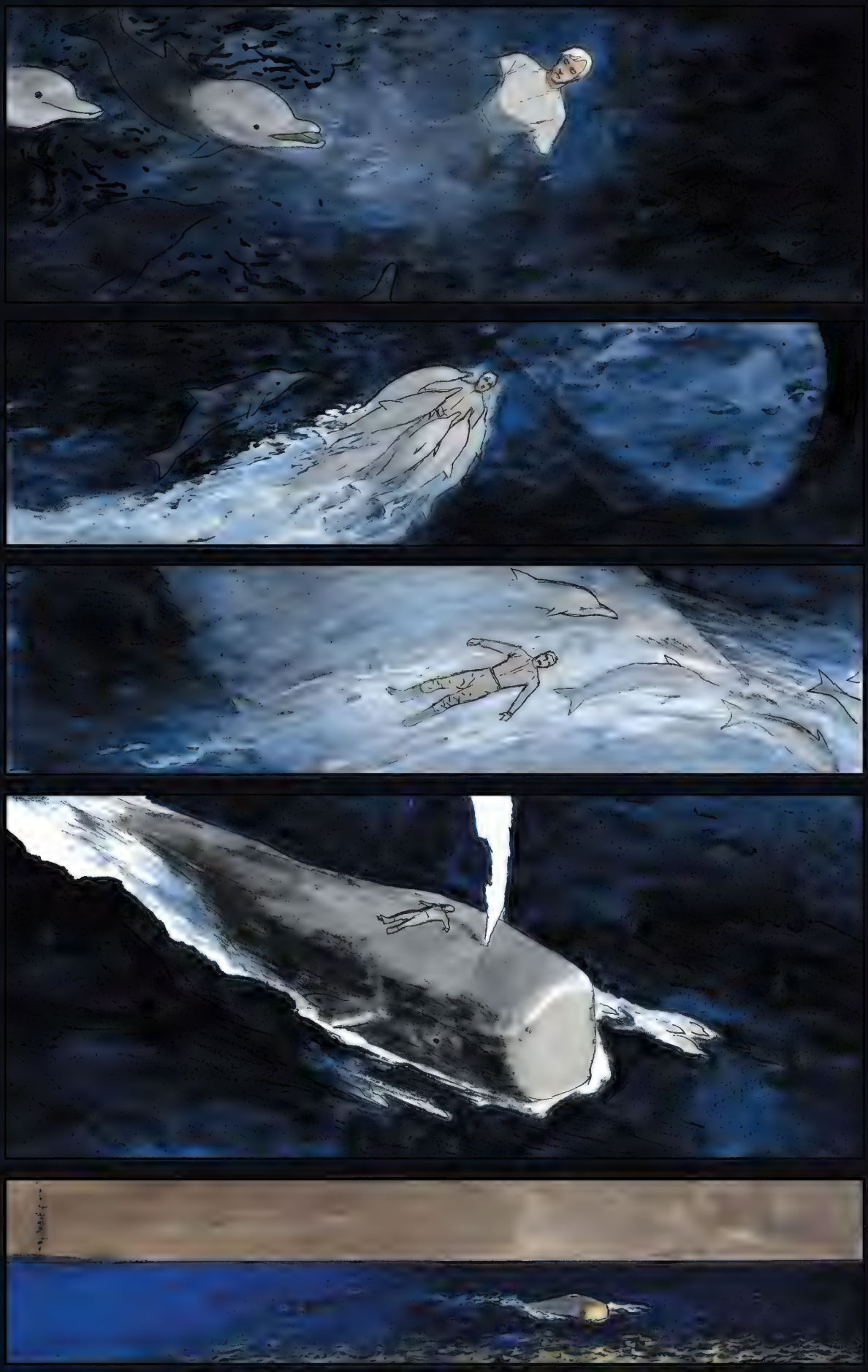

"He was mad. Babbled that a cable could...in theory...stretch up from the equator!
"Past low Earth orbit...
"...rooted to the sky by centrifugal force.
"He called it a space elevator."


"THOSE FEW WHO CLIMB ITS BRANCHES WILL BE SAVED...
"...TO START OVER...
"...ONCE ALL THE GODS ARE GONE.
"...ALL BUT ONE.
"AS FORETOLD, A CHOSEN FEW WILL SHELTER IN THE ARMS OF YGGDRASIL...
"...WHILE THE REST--GODS, GIANTS, MEN--ALL PERISH BELOW.
"I DO NOT DINE OFF THE LIFE-FORCE OF SLAUGHTERED HUMANS. NO NEED!
"NOT WHEN SOMETHING ELSE IS DYING. SOMETHING GREATER BY FAR.
"A DYING WORLD."

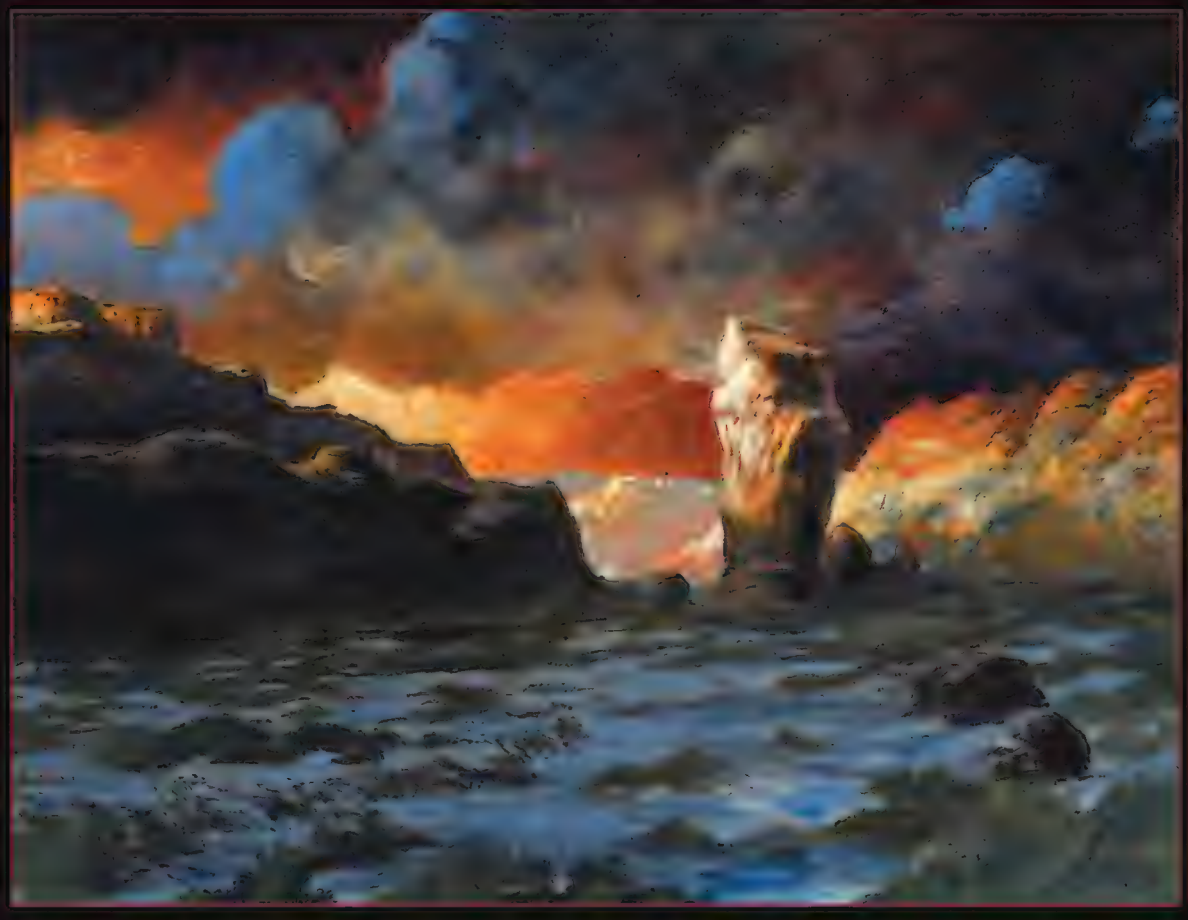
"Fulfilling destiny,
Yggdrasil rises–
Feeding and growing
As Midgard perishes.
"SOME will wait patiently
Safe in its branches–
Till all the frenzy
Ebbs into silences.
"Then we'll return,
Calmly, in triumph–
To stake my claim
On a world reborn."
You're building an ark...like Noah! To start over...
Only your tree is helping cause the dying! More necromancy. Your brothers eat people...but you'll murder the planet...
...so you can be the last god!
MEASURE ME BY THE FRUIT I PICK. THE SEEDS I PLANT.
YOU ARE AMONG MY CHOSEN. BRAVE, YET MORE CLEVER THAN THOR'S "HEROES."
IN THE NEXT WORLD, YOU'LL KNOW OBEDIENCE, NOT IGNORANCE. YOU MAY EVEN QUESTION ME, WITH RESPECT.

THAT IS MY WAY. REWARD THE CLEVER. EVEN IF THEY BRIEFLY RESIST--
YMIR!

And so I came to be cast adrift in the wide sea, weaponless, without armor...
...and filled with renewed horror at the true nature of a cosmos where cruelty knew no natural limits--
--and where intelligence only makes things worse.
Drifting westward, past Loki's realm, I knew only that I was beaten...and wanted no further part in battle. What side could I choose? None with any chance.
"I'm sorry," I told the spirit of Chris Turing, whose courage and example guided me for years..."I tried, but never found a way."
No one would be inspired by my passing.
Still, my death would feed the Earth--Mother Ocean, not the mad gods we unleashed on her.
That was some consolation.
As indifferent currents swept me past Ceylon's tropical shore, I prayed.
Let the waters take me.
My prayer was answered...
...in an unexpected way.



– PART THREE –
"SACRIFICE"

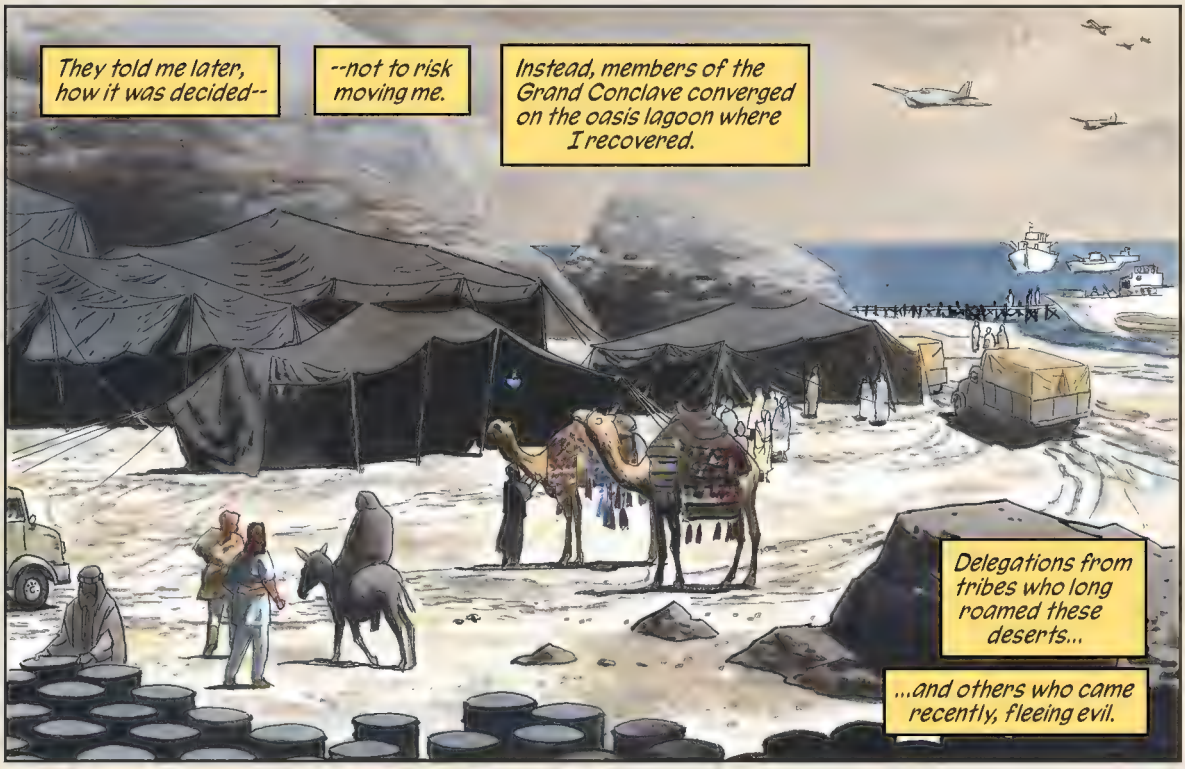


Bring in a wagon the sacred idols.
Hang a man from a tree,
Wound him by a lance.
Send smoke curling to Valhalla.
Thus is the sacrifice holy to Woden,
Called Odin by the Norse,
and God of the Middle Day.

– The Norse Sagas

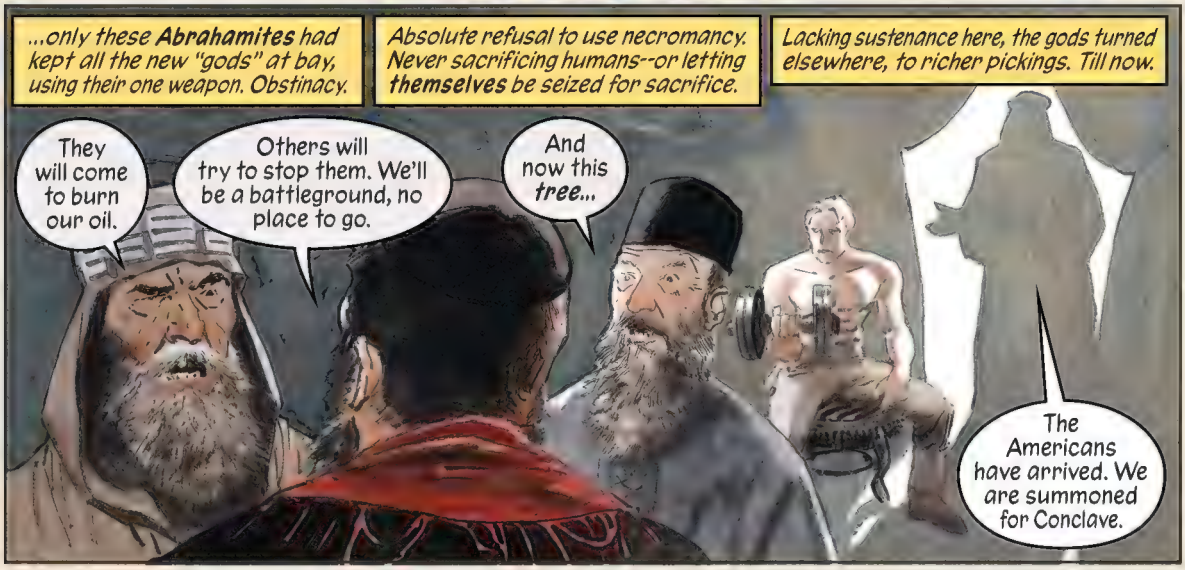
High in the dawn sky...
...travels a star that is not a star.
A star of war. Of vengeance.
But today, something else.
A guide for those in search.
Trace complete...
...subject located.
Sending coordinates.
For those in search of hope.
Beyond those dunes.

Uh--unh...
He is alive. By the will of Allah.
He could still be a spy.
The Americans never fully trusted him. Until recent events--
Do we have a choice? By all the signs--
--we'll have one chance to get it right.


They told me later, how it was decided--
--not to risk moving me.
Instead, members of the Grand Conclave converged on the oasis lagoon where I recovered.
Delegations from tribes who long roamed these deserts...
...and others who came recently, fleeing evil.

Weak, delirious, I vaguely heard them argue. Whether to trust me. Or let me live.
I did not care.

Later, I told them all I knew--
--about Thor, his fearsome enemies--all the mad eaters of life--a coming Weather War.
And Loki's parasitic **Tree**--strangling our old world to make another.
As if telling these ragged refugees would make a difference.
Healing quickly, I knew...


...only these **Abrahamites** had kept all the new "gods" at bay, using their one weapon. Obstinacy.
Absolute refusal to use necromancy. Never sacrificing humans--or letting **themselves** be seized for sacrifice.
Lacking sustenance here, the gods turned elsewhere, to richer pickings. Till now.
They will come to burn our oil.
Others will try to stop them. We'll be a battleground, no place to go.
And now this **tree**...
The Americans have arrived. We are summoned for Conclave.

Lewis. I'm glad. Then the base--
--survived, thanks to you. We tracked you here. There are things--
Please enter.
The chairmanship rotates.
Today it's the noble and wise Ayatollah of Karbala.
Brothers, sisters, and guests from across the sea. Sit and be refreshed. We have much to discuss.
But first...our atonement.
We bow before God the Merciful and Almighty...
...repenting sins against each other...
...against our world...against the future--
--sins that helped to bring an age of calamities.
Sins of cruel pride.

First spoke the Hebrew envoy, gaunt from ghettos, camps, then grinding war. His voice resonant, enduring.

"We heirs of Abraham and Sarah first rejected human sacrifice, made covenant with the Almighty and proclaimed equality. This light shone for all."

His head lowered.

"But, we were proud. Amid oppression, our covenant seemed alone!

"But Isaac *wasn't* Abraham's only son! Ishmael bore the burden, as do all heirs of Noah. All who seek, enquire, or love their neighbor. All stand with the prophets."

The Arab took his hand.

"Pride is the deceiver—a drug—twisting holy words to justify hatred."

He beat a fist on his breast.

"Why did we not *welcome home* the children of Isaac after 20 centuries of exile? Our differences are less than sun-speckles on children of the same Father.

"In this final hour, we stand together, as destined."

"That holds for *other* feuds from the past," offered mighty Persia's legate.

"Our ancesters fought over details—Sunni and Shia, Catholic and Protestant. Can't a child be wiser than the parent?"

"Let us cede whatever wounds others," said the envoy of New Rome.

"Even symbols long cherished. Like the oblatory crusaders' cross—too often soaked in blood—unlike the teachings of Christ. We return to the sign used by Jesus and Peter—fishermen who gathered the lost. An *inclusive* emblem of humility and life."

"Each of us claimed his prophet was the last!" spoke a dusky preacher, famed in the cause of freedom.

"What inner demon compels us to declare truth static?

"To deny new revelation, even when it smacks your face?

"Why deny that tomorrow may bring change? It always does! And shocks never prophecied."

Atonement continued with visiting envoys from across the sea—the Hindu Compassion Movement, the Buddhist League... and others.

Ideology helped bring us here--

--and nationalism. And smug tales about class or race.

Words!-- like *right* and *left*. Incantations to demonize others and praise *our side*--

--while neglecting our daughters' ambition--

--and the empathy of our sons.

What of *science?* Creation's tools lie before us--

--to use! Is this happenstance? Or have we some great chore?

*It went on, each envoy confessing past fault, absolving others. Yet, I thought, how odd. Nobody cast blame on whoever **designed** this world...made its rules--culminating in today's hell.*

And so we came to see...

...we are being given a last chance to choose a *champion*. One who won't give in to temptation--

--for *victory* may prove as dire as defeat! This one must *refuse power*.

As *you* have done, several times.

By all signs, you are this man.

What if signs tell me *you're* all crazy? An Aesir--any top-level *god*--will swat your "champion" like a mouse. You won't use necromancy--

We won't. But we *have* peered closely at that hateful art.

"Long ago, most human tribes believed a dark notion--that agonizing *death* released potent magic. Nations sacrificed people, hoping to harness *mana*. Gain strength. Appease angry heavens. Expiate sin.

"With Abraham, a tide began turning against horrid superstitions that dazzled and exploited with false promises. *Science* later added the power of skepticism, testing and disproving one cruel magic after another--till few credited dark mysteries anymore.

"Those few, alas, included *Nazis*. Using conquest and technology, they made a final, grotesque try--necromancy on an unprecedented scale!

"It should not have worked. A final disproof of foul mysticism. Instead, they met unspeakable success. Their method spread, infecting the globe!

"Some draw comfort from a thought. Are there happier realities--another Earth--where magic stayed limited to fantasy? Or is this a fever dream? The *nightmare* of a Creator trapped in delirium? May he waken!

"But time presses. We're at war, so be pragmatic. If these 'new gods' devour the life-force of dying men... is it possible--or permitted--that men do likewise to *them?*

"We have decided--at great peril--to try."

Is...is there a chance? What makes you think I can even get close?

Several thousand people have been working on that problem.

The conquerors have converted the mainland economy to war. They relish equipping their slave troops with cyborg stuff--like those jump-packs our grunts use in Asia.
But the techs back home bravely *hide* their best stuff. They smuggle breakthroughs offshore, to hidden workshops.
We've been saving them for the right moment. The right man.
Are you serious?
Has it been tested?

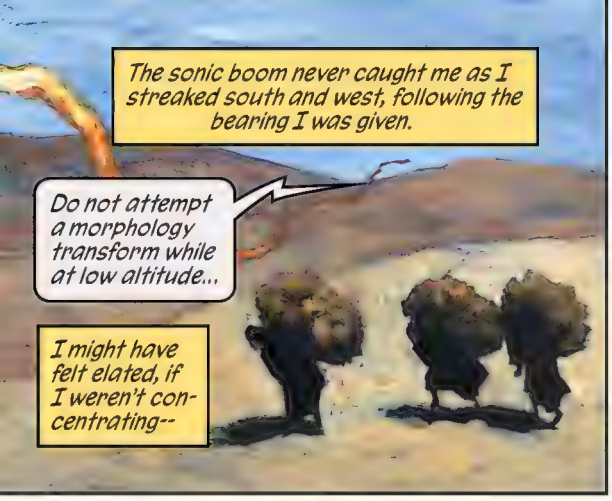
No one's had the nerve.
Can't say I blame them.

Controls are like your old suit. But note the power and duration scales...
The reactor should last months, but refill the water tanks!
A tape will explain weaponry en route...
...en route? Wait...

...you mean... NOW?

You deserve rest. Time to prepare.
But an army from Egypt approaches the El Arish fields.
While other forces come from the north.
The weather war has begun.
Very well.
Guidance activated.
I hope that's a really good teaching tape.
Welcome, pilot--
--this Mark IV prototype has a number of unusual features.
We'll update you along the way.
Go with God...
...and the hopes of humanity.
We recommend that you adapt to the enhanced power unit--

--in gradual stages.
YA-A-A-A-AAAAAAAA!


The sonic boom never caught me as I streaked south and west, following the bearing I was given.
Do not attempt a morphology transform while at low altitude...
I might have felt elated, if I weren't concentrating--

That, all by itself, was surprising.

The tenuous sensation of having a chance.

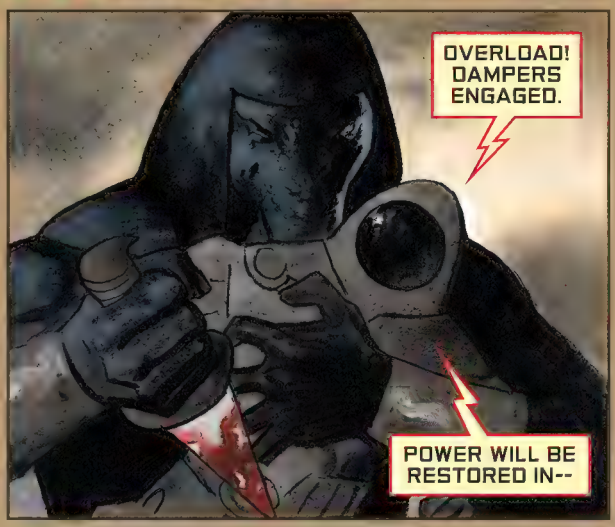
Of course it was absurd.
Could any mortal matter? Even assisted by the skill and courage of others?
Still, amid all this power and speed... I felt--

--this was what I had lived for. Ever since that night on Gotland...
...when Chris Turing showed the way.
Steady, lads! Make every round count.
None of us gets taken alive.

An "Egyptian Army" stretched ahead of me.
A much older Egypt. Led by ancient gods and demigods.
Some were huge. Swollen on a recent gorging of death. Eager for more.
From experience I knew that a "god" in this state is especially dangerous.
Brother... before Allah... waken!
What...?

I had never taken such a blow!
Those cracks! Fire every missile we have left!

Alarms went off.


OVERLOAD! DAMPERS ENGAGED.
POWER WILL BE RESTORED IN--

Had to try something. Anything.
WARNING! NEURAL DISCHARGE IS EXPERIMENTAL.
CAPACITORS ALLOW ONLY ONE USE--
NEURAL DISCHARGE
E. M. PULSE
NEUTRON SPRAY

The major "god" let go...
...dropping me into a riot of demigods.

DANGER! PRIMARY SYSTEMS STILL RECHARGING.
I was desperate enough to try anything. Remembering that desert holy man--

--I pulled out the weapon he gave me.

I didn't care which prayers they used to bless the blade.
It was handy.
Take cover!
MAIN SYSTEMS RESTORED.
It seemed a good idea to get some room.

What I saw then may have been illusion, caused by tension. By sensory overload.
Could it be **souls,** shining--briefly visible--as they took flight...
...liberated from an awful prison?
Even now, I can't say **what** I perceived, through a pane of adamantine quartz.
But it felt like a good thing. The best thing.
I wanted to do it again.
Fantastic! Better than we dreamed! This data will help.
But return now. That's an order.
I'm not finished!
Your suit needs servicing. It needs water.

The suit mustn't fall into enemy hands! Scans show a large force of Aesir coming from the north.

Odin...

We presume. At least he'll protect the oil fields. I say again--come home.

Home?

The word had just one meaning to me.

The only meaning it could have at a time like this.

WATER SCOOP

The only meaning it should ever have.

You're off course! Follow the guidance lock!

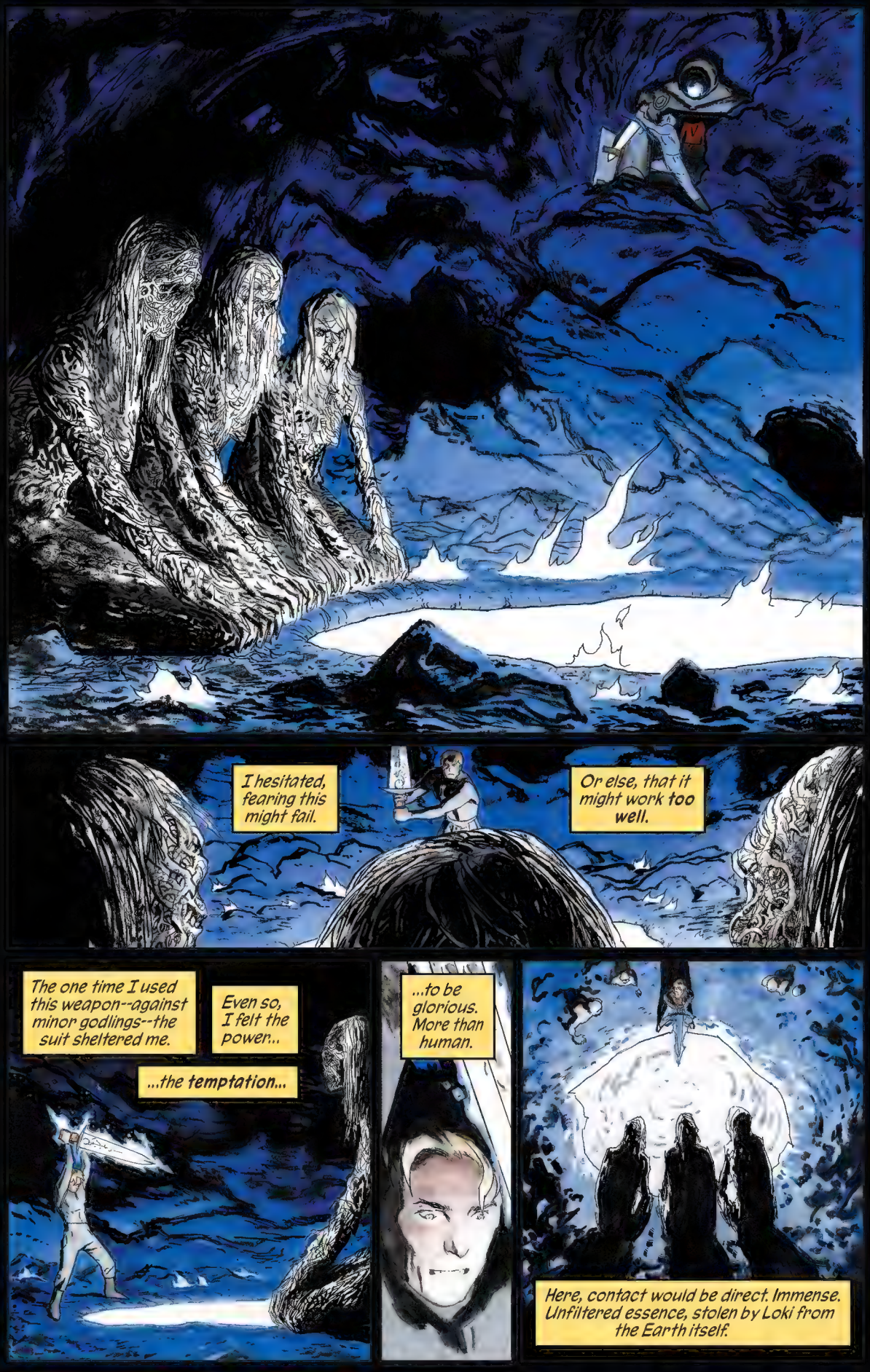
PROPELLANT 92% (FULL)

Sorry, Lewis. You have enough data to make more machines. Even better ones!
I need this one right now.
Wait! What do you think you're--
=click=
I felt bad about cutting him off. In the long run, people like Lewis-- or Joe Kasting or Jane Chen-- were more important than my kind.
The world had suffered enough from romantic egotists--
--kings and wizards. Nazis and other mystics. Ideologues and "great leaders."
Demigods...and superheroes.
They all had their chance. 6,000 years of glory and promises, while treating common folk as children or property...
...keeping them in awe, worshipful, ignorant.
Till people rebelled! Shrugging off lords and superstitions, turning to universities, democracy and passionate argument, questioning every authority.
A noisier time! But under the bickering lay a potent mix of pragmatism and faith.
Faith in themselves. In each other. In the future.
Oh, to have lived then! It must have felt like a new dawn. Women and men unafraid of the dark.
Until magic struck back.

Now was the moment to say, enough!
On the enslaved mainland...in deep caverns and under the sea...
...risking their lives to share and plan...
...people would stand up to demigods, armed with hearts, minds...
...and the great weapon of cooperative skill.
Fighting to save our home.
For the first time, I believed. It might happen!
But first, someone had to buy time...

...an old-fashioned hero.
It was easy tracing my way back, following the death-pallor of a wounded planet.
CLIMB NOW, CHOSEN ONES. WE'LL ABIDE ON HIGH AS THE OLD WORLD DIES.
WE'LL INHERIT A NEW WORLD...
YMIR!

Born in Sweden, raised on Gotland, I heard all the old myths.
Dour fables that necromancy had made real.
So I knew what lay under these roots.
A secret place, forbidden to mortals.


I hesitated, fearing this might fail.
Or else, that it might work too well.
The one time I used this weapon--against minor godlings--the suit sheltered me.
Even so, I felt the power...
...the temptation...
...to be glorious. More than human.
Here, contact would be direct. Immense. Unfiltered essence, stolen by Loki from the Earth itself.

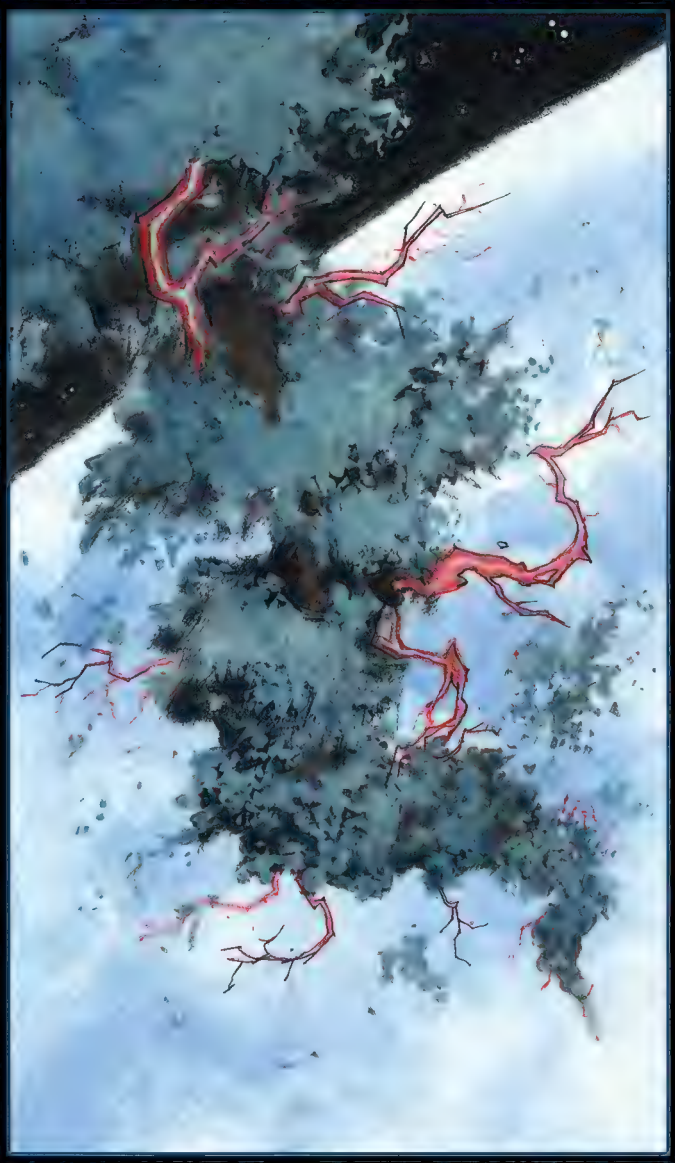
I hesitated too long.

SO. YOU NOT ONLY DEFY ME...

...YOU AIM TO *REPLACE* ME.

Don't flatter yourself. I'm only the janitor, sent to mop up a human mistake.
We make lots of them. Live and learn.
TO CORRECT THIS MISTAKE--IN ORDER TO LEARN--YOU MUST LIVE. BUT YOU WON'T.
I saw just one chance. To convey a message--
--in double meaning.
No. To correct this mistake, all we have to do is see.
Can you see it, Joe? What you must do?
He understood.
But someone must distract Loki.
I had only seen one mortal dare what I must do--
--look an Aesir in the eye. My heart quailed.
Y-you aren't as bad as some, Loki.
Maybe we'll keep you around, as a fable.
But the truth is--
--I don't believe in you.

And soon... nobody will. Ever again.
It took such force of will.
I could only hold it for a moment--
--but it was enough.

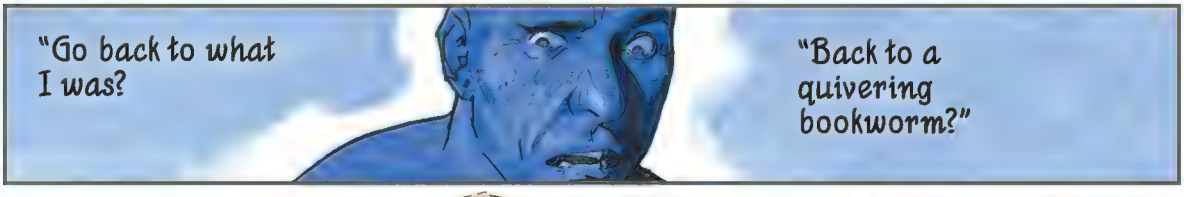


His cry reverberated in our minds. We could all feel his realization...
...of the power flowing through him.

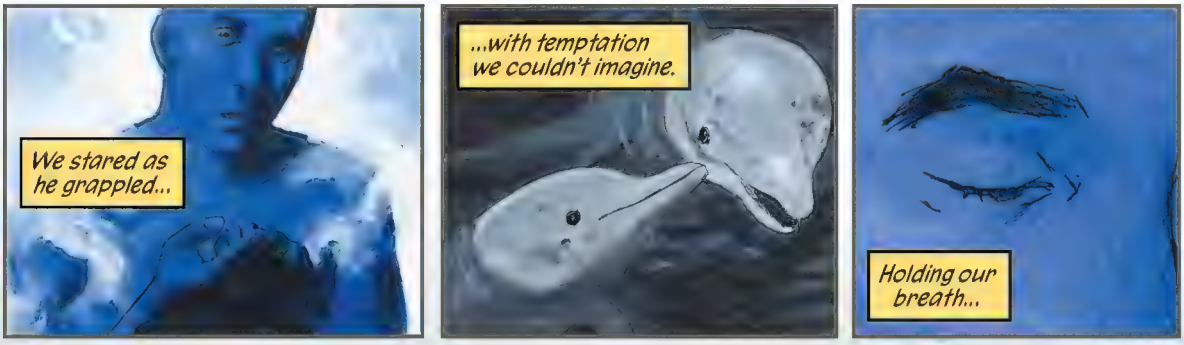
Joe...let it go!
It doesn't belong to you.
"How could you know?
"All the limitations...the old fears... are gone!
"I feel GREAT!"

"I feel the planets, spinning!
"They wobble at my touch.
"The pain of the world...
"...it pours through me...
"I could repair the harm!"

Joe! You have to come back now.
I had tasted that power. Though a much smaller dose than Joe Kasting now experienced.
Power to do anything! To end the horror. To banish all the petty godlings.
Power to set things right.
What man could resist?
Only he **must** resist.


"Go back to what I was?
"Back to a quivering bookworm?"

Back to a brave soldier...
...a scientist...
...a man.
Come back to me, Joe.
It doesn't belong to you. This isn't our way.


We stared as he grappled...
...with temptation we couldn't imagine.
Holding our breath...

Till it happened.

The miracle.
Surrounding the pit, we found less debris than you'd expect. Most of the Tree's stolen essence had poured back into the Earth. Perhaps enough to help our home survive the coming battles.
No sign of Loki, though I knew we hadn't seen the last of the Trickster.
A "weather war"...
...and a war of freedom against magic.
Still, at long last, I felt cause for hope.
The holy man had been wrong. I wasn't the "champion."
I've met two real heroes. The first showed me the way, years ago, defying evil.
I saw another, now. A man. **Citizen.** One of us.
That very moment, I knew...
...we would prevail...

...though it would take some time.

THE END

AFTERWORD

Science fiction was given the wrong name.

Only a small fraction of SF authors—and the tales they spin—have anything to do with *science*. What really compels us are twin notions of *change* and *transformation*—the world changing all around us, and humanity transforming from within.

Time is the essence. Time, like a juggernaut.

That's why more writers of SF study history than science. We devour legends and clues from the past, including tales of tragedy, triumph and lost opportunity. Our stories tend to be thought-experiments about that ongoing epic—either altering the past or extending the human saga into a future of possibilities. A much better name for the field might have been *Speculative History*.

Yes, a majority of our stories ask "what if?" Or ponder "if this goes on…" Tomorrow remains a popular playground. But sometimes it can be just as riveting to look at the present or the past—pondering how things "might have been."

The original novella behind *The Life Eaters* came about when I was invited by Gregory Benford, way back in the 1980s, to write for his anthology *Hitler Victorious*, a collection of tales about how the good guys might have lost the Second World War. It's been a fascinating sub-genre ever since Philip K. Dick wrote *The Man in the High Castle*—a great way to cause chills by imagining that history's worst boogeyman succeeded.

I never swallowed the common notion that "the Nazis almost won." *Ours* is the universe in which those delusional maniacs got amazing breaks, ruling and perverting a great nation instead of raving in lunatic asylums. We must never give murderous maniacs such a chance again.

Only that got me thinking. Might there have been even more to their delusions—their well-documented mysticism—than anyone figured? Steven Speilberg did a great job portraying Nazi obsession with the romantic and the occult in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.
Himmler's SS practiced many weird rites. But did it go much deeper?

It occurred to me that the aim of the Holocaust cannot have *only* been death. Why transport so many people across great distances to be batch-processed in an industrial assembly line of horror? Why indeed, unless there was a sick hope for some product or result? The same result pursued by dark magic through the ages.

So much of popular culture nowadays seems eager to show the sweetly wise and benevolent side of a mystical tradition that spanned most cultures and almost every continent. Even in modern comics, there is a tendency to follow the old trope of Homer—the notion that super empowered demigods matter more than the hard, cooperative work of skilled men and women.

The same women and men who built the universities and took us to the moon. Citizens who fought (and still fight) for freedom and the environment. The same people who roused themselves, rolled up their sleeves, and pounded Adolf Hitler's monsters back into mythology, where monsters belong.

True, there is still a world that needs saving, in a myriad ways. We feel a chilling sense that everything is precarious. Sometimes it's so tempting to wish for *intervention*—by magical beings, by UFO grays, by cyberpunk supernerds or mighty mutants.

But honestly, who is likely to save civilization, or this planet, or our children's future? Meddlesome aliens? Mystic incantations? Superheroes?

Or us?

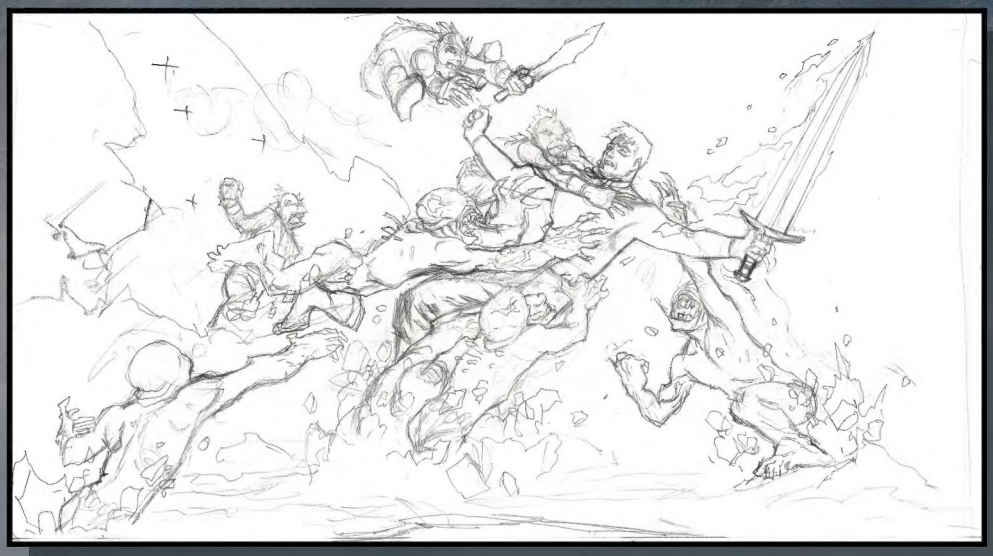
Forgive me, but I have to be optimistic. No other wager makes sense!

I'm betting on us.

David Brin

FROM PENCILS

PENCILS



I like to keep my pencils fairly loose. This is tighter than usual for me since it's a pretty involved scene with the albino mole creatures erupting from the earth and the dward guys attacking from the rear, but it's still little more than a basic blueprint.

INKS

This is where the fun really starts for me. Roughs and initial pencils are work–when they go well, there's no part of a piece that I'm happier with; still, they strain the brain. Inking and painting, although they're by no means unconsidered, are more about instinct, where I get to turn on my Books on Tape or music and sort of bliss out.

TO FINISH

PAINTS

Here's where the panel really starts to take shape, come into focus. Drawing problems I hadn't known about begin to stand out as the picture takes on weight and depth. This is always unhappy-making. I'll usually keep working around the problem areas hoping they'll just go away. (This almost never happens.) Finally, the panel is finished with that awkward hand (or whatever) either–A. cast in deep shadow ("when in doubt, black it out.") or, B. obscured by a passing bird or leaf or flailing body or, C. fixed.

Sometimes I opt for C, but not without at least thinking about A or B.

Hey, babe–that's comics!

–Scott Hampton

*This is a piece of wisdom from the great Wally Wood.

BIOS

See more at
DavidBrin.com

David Brin is a scientist, best-selling author, and tech-futurist. His novels include *Earth*, *The Postman* (filmed in 1997), and Hugo Award winners *Startide Rising* and *The Uplift War*. A leading commentator and speaker on modern trends, his nonfiction book *The Transparent Society* won the Freedom of Speech Award of the American Library Association.

See more at
ScottHamptonArt.com

Scott Hampton is a freelance comic book artist known for his diversity. Hampton has illustrated such iconic properties as Batman, Sandman, Black Widow, Hellraiser, and Star Trek in addition to work on his creator-owned projects such as *The Upturned Stone*.

THE LIFE EATERS

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